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TROUBLED STAR

George O. Smith

This was one performance
he dared not fail
—for there would never be
a remake



TROUBLED STAR • George O. Smith

X

A
GALAXY
PRIZE
SELECTION



256

256



TROUBLED STAR

A GALAXY Selected Novel
For
BEACON BOOKS



TROUBLED STAR

by George O. Smith

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ALL CHARACTERS IN THIS WORK ARE WHOLLY
FICTITIOUS AND ANY RESEMBLANCE TO PERSONS
LIVING OR DEAD IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL

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FOREWORD—EN SAGA

At least once in every generation there turns up a person who is embarrassing to the Custodians of History. With neither talent nor ambition, nor studious application nor admirable character, this person succeeds where the bright and the studious and the intellectually honest would have failed miserably. Stubborn, egocentric, vain—often stupid—our person blunders in where the wise and the sincere would not dare. His hide is thicker than that of the rhinoceros, and he does not hesitate to tell the surgeon where to apply the scalpel or to instruct the statesman on a course of diplomacy. His little knowledge is a dangerous thing—for other people.

Such an one's success can be attributed to the Law of Averages.

History holds many accounts of the brave and the brilliant stepping in at the right time to avert disaster. Yet, there are more dimwits of record than geniuses, more cowards than heroes, and more laziness than ambition attributed to our human race, so it is not surprising that there should be occasions when a bum or a self-centered braggart should find that History has an especial niche waiting for him to fill.

His is not the mold of a hero, for he risks nothing. The word "Industry" does not appear in his motto because any labor he performs is that of strict necessity, and is avoided even then, if he can coerce someone else to do it for him. But when credit is to be handed out he is first in line, partly because he is not work-weary, and can get there first.

There is no explaining him, one can only accept him

as a fact. He is the kind of person who pokes a stick in the ground and strikes oil; thrown for a loss, he lands on his feet with a head start in a footrace. Some people call him "Lucky."

Other people just swear.

CHAPTER I

They were parked on the darkside of Mercury, snug and comfortable within a hemisphere of force that held in the air and kept out the cold. At one side, where force met ground, a tall silvery spacecraft rose like a chimney. The setting, from a distance, was artistic—well-composed, although artistic composition was least in importance. The fact is noted if only to establish a rough estimation of the era.

A man or woman old enough to have visited Greater New York in early youth might recall a spire and sphere that had been famous as the emblem of a vast exposition. It had been known all over the Earth, and there one could still find old pictures of the Trylon and Perisphere, which would ring the memory bell.

That is, if any man from Earth caught sight of this group on Mercury.

It is impossible not to consider them as human, all three of them. There was Chat Honger, tall, redheaded, thin-faced; the kind of person who seems incapable of quieting down, but also has a fund of patience for things that cannot be done in an instant. There was Bren Fallow, shorter than Chat and dark, slightly round-faced and amiable; he was the kind who checks and re-checks everything before making a move, and as a result seldom moves wrong. He was also the kind who arrives second or third in a lot of other things because someone else took a chance.

The third man was Scyth Radnor. You could describe a machine or a bit of equipment to Scyth Radnor and then forget him for a time; he would return with

a working model. It would probably be crude, but it would be a working model, adequate for preliminary use. Scyth's failing was that he seemed unable to perform any real creative effort. He couldn't locate the door that would open into a room full of ideas. You had to show him the door, and explain the lock; then you could stand back out of the way while Scyth produced.

Teach them the language, and drop all three into Greater New York, and they would blend in with Manhattan's Millions. Oh! Better change their clothing, too. After all, striped shorts, Greek sandals, a Sam Browne belt across a bare chest, and a Roman toga of changing iridescent hues is not the kind of costume that is seen every day on Fifth Avenue.

Aside from that, they could fit in very nicely. Their usages are like our own, when their language is translated directly. Slang, swearwords, elision, and sarcasm are more in evidence than the formal discourse that might be expected to come from representatives of a high, well-established culture, one that had been founding population centers all over the galaxy for twenty thousand years.

Chat Honger was prowling the hemisphere like a caged animal. "I say let's forget it and get along with our work."

Bren Fallow shook his head. "Take is easy. I've been dubious about this ever since . . ."

"You're always dubious unless you can see all eight sides of anything at once. Now, why should we stop?"

"I didn't say that we should stop. But we ought to proceed more slowly."

Chat growled. "Look," he snapped, "we came here with a thirty-day job to do. You've succeeded in stretching it into ninety days, so far, and we still aren't done. And why?"

Bren started to count off on his fingers. "If you want to know why, I'll re-state the problem. One. This star is the kind of main sequence, middle-energy yellow

dwarf, flare-star that is always assumed to have habitable planets. That slowed us up considerably, first."

"And I'll answer you as you make your points," said Chat. "You know darned well that if there were any habitable planets in this region of the sky they'd be inhabited. Why, if . . ."

"You realize that this rift was not known until the survey located it?"

"Of course. That's why we're here. So you've just proved your point, Bren. If this rift were known, you'd be able to read by the flare-lights of the spacecraft passing through."

"I have not proved my point. I think you have invented the proving, too, Chat. The point is that we've found a star here that has every factor correct for habitable planets. Therefore, we should proceed slowly and be sure that it is not inhabited before we find it too late."

Honger eyed Bren Fallow sourly. "You're not suggesting that this star might have a cultured form of life that we don't know about."

"I'm suggesting that we don't know everything there is to know."

Chat held his hand to his temple. "If we've got to plumb the depth of all knowledge before we make a move, we're licked before we start. You know that in all of the inhabited planets of the galaxy, no one has ever come upon any form of intelligent life that was not of our own race, carefully planted there by our own Colonization Council."

Bren waved a small photographic negative. "Planet Three seems to be about as habitable as Marandis itself, from what we can tell."

"Good. Maybe we can use it as a way station someday. But—" Chat turned to Radnor. "Scyth, have you located anything even remotely resembling communications in this section of the sky?"

"We all know that the phanobands are as dead as you-know-what," replied Radnor. "And the machinus

fields are as empty as one would expect this far from a colonized route or cluster center. As for the radiomagnetic spectrum, I'm not too sure, Chat. We'd expect radiomagnetic energy in the region of a flare-star, but now and then I get a recurrent disturbance that has too short a repetition-time to be a natural phenomenon."

Fallow turned on Chat. "Let's assume that this Planet Three is inhabited by a primitive form of intelligent life."

"I'll play your game," chuckled Honger.

"A primitive form of culture, say in the early Atomic days of the Physico-mechan Age."

"Do prattle on."

"Well, take a look at your ancient history—or are you one of those people who believe that anything more than a few hundred years old isn't worth studying?"

"I'm a bit of a materialist," Honger admitted.

"Then get idealistic. Things weren't too uninteresting in the ancient days, my boy. Look. They used fissionates to produce power. No one had even postulated the first glimmerings of the machinus theory of space-time. Why, they hadn't begun discovering factors that would lead them to question the theory of general relativity. As far as the phanobands are concerned, they had to discard relativity in favor of the machinus before they found any evidence to lead them into the phanobands and their use."

"Lecture on, Master," said Chat hollowly.

Bren Fallow looked at Honger sharply, then ignored the possible insult and continued: "In the early days of the Physico-mechan Age, the radiomagnetic spectrum was exploited about as completely as it would seem possible. Right up to the theoretical limit, Chat. Services were clamoring for spectrum-space. There are bands for commercial communication, for entertainment, for scientific data, for navigation. Amplitude modulation and frequency modulation vied for importance. Television signals cluttered up the spectrum, and the nu-

merous forms of radiolocating devices filled the higher spectrum right up to the point where radiation is curtailed by the absorption spectrum of the atmospheric gases."

Chat held up a hand. "You've again disproved your point," he said exultantly. "Have I got it right this time?"

"I have not—and you have not!"

"Well, if the radiomagnetic spectrum was so crammed with signals, how come we . . ."

"You ought to look into things that you don't understand, Chat," said Fallow quietly. "Scyth, do you have that book on primitive communications handy?"

Scyth Radnor handed Bren a page of semi-flexible material that was a soft white finish covered with a myriad of dots in rows, like the benday screen used to shade cartoons. Bren slipped the book into the reader and adjusted the page until the right group appeared on the screen. "Now, dammit, read!"

Chat read:

"Radiomagnetic communications are the mark of the semi—"

"Not there," objected Fallow. "Take it down here a few lines."

"Oh. I see," replied Chat. He continued:

". . . are eventually abandoned in favor of phanoband communications because of the limitations of the radiomagnetic spectrum. One of the most important limitations is the confinement of a greater portion of the spectrum to the planet itself by ionized layers in the upper atmosphere. (See Madermot's suggestion on galactic exploration re radiomagnetic waves.) It had been known . . ."

"That's all I want you to read," said Bren. "Now do you get the point?"

Chat Honger nodded slowly. "What does Madermot have to say?"

"Madermot's suggestion is that no importance should be placed upon the absence of radiomagnetic signals. Those frequencies that are capable of penetrating the ionization layers of the planet are nearly always beamed tightly, which means that from any distance the chance of detecting them are almost nil."

Chat bowed from the waist. "So we have a star of the right type, and a planet of the right shape, and the absence of radiomagnetics. This is adequate reason for stalling?"

"I think so."

"I think not. Time is money, Bren, and we've lost enough of both. I say let's establish our beacon and then consider the more esoteric aspects of your act of vandalism."

"No."

"What do you want us to do? Shall we take a week off to visit this Planet Three of yours?"

"Might be a good idea," said Bren thoughtfully.

"And spread phanoband signals all over this section of the sky so that the Transgalactic outfit will wonder what we're doing here?"

"How else can we tell? We obviously can't take a month of Sundays in a non-powered orbit for security reasons."

"We spent too much time getting here for that," agreed Honger. He turned to Radnor. "How many menslators have we aboard?"

Scyth thought a minute. "Six, I think. Maybe eight."

Bren Fallow eyed Chat sourly. "You couldn't use a menslator on someone who isn't addressing you directly. What's the idea?"

Honger smiled. "If that planet is inhabited by some primitive culture capable of even the lowest grade civilization, there will be the leading character—a man of fame and power, who will be the focal point of all attention. If enough people are thinking about him, we

learn the man's identity with the menslator, I should say."

"But suppose everybody's thinking anger-thoughts about a louse?"

"Look, Bren, when you land on some planet a little bit farther from the back door of Marandis, and you take to the menslator, can you tell whether the guy you're menslating is a popular hero or a louse?"

"Of course. But they both speak our language—or something close to it."

"Well, if there are ten or twenty thousand people either admiring or hating some one person, we should know it, too. Lord knows, we won't be able to tell much of the basic thoughts in a strange culture, but we should be able to find the focal point of mental attention and—well, once we do that, if such is the case, we'll know how to take on from there."

"I think you're basing this whole program on very sketchy evidence indeed."

Chat Honger shook his head. "Most of your worry is that there may be a planet here containing the proper environment for human life. Well, if there is, and it is inhabited now, we take Course One. If it's here, but uninhabited, we can forget about it until it's needed, or wanted—or perhaps we can forget it forever—and get along with our work. Remember, we came here, after the Survey found this rift, to establish a beacon. If there's any crack-up in our plans, or if we do something wrong, we can always complain that Survey didn't make complete and proper investigations, you know."

"I suppose you're right. Survey should know these things."

"Then a quick menslator-search will clear up the whole question. Maybe the place is populated by animals and other non-sentient life forms. In that event, who cares?"

"Okay. Scyth, will you set up one of the menslators and see if you can tune it to any thought-pattern that might be radiating from Planet Three?"

"I can do it. It'll take a bit of time, and I'll probably have to cannibalize a couple of other menslators to do it."

"Go ahead, we've got enough for the three of us."

The argument in the galactic's installation on the Mercury darkside abated as the trio went to work. Scyth Radnor began to tinker with menslators; Chat Honger was once more showing patience but prowling like a caged animal; and Bren Fallow was busy measuring the radiation of Sol on his panel of instruments, factor by factor.

CHAPTER II

On this Third Planet of Sol, there were still captains and kings (a good and gracious Queen had reigned and gone); presidents and elected commissioners; commissars, and other persons who professed to be benevolent guardians of public rights. Things had not changed much since the days of the Trylon and Perisphere. The names had changed a bit, some of them violently, and some in gentle, well-deserved sleep.

Names of places had changed but little; some had been erased in the heat of ideological argument, but by and large they persisted despite nuclear weapons and man's inhumanity to man. Youth was still going to perdition, and old age was still fuddy-duddy. Juveniles were still delinquent; after all, they had examples to follow all about them, and their examples had been led into social error by the example's examples, as had been the case for thousands of years.

There was only one apparent change, and this change had been not only expected but anticipated by the people whose business depended upon keeping one jump

ahead of the public whimsy. It started a good many years before the advent of New York's Tylon and Perisphere, the artistic counterpart of which was now standing on Mercury's darkside, hidden from the sight of man.

The pioneer was a large food company that made a product called "Quaker Oats," distributed in a cylindrical package about four inches in diameter and eight inches long. Not long after the first World Conflict of the century, the manufacturer of this product discovered that his sales were rising more rapidly than the changing food-taste of the public warranted. Some scientific investigation showed that the public was not becoming addicted to oatmeal as a morning, noon, and night diet—with a midnight snack of the same, to make up the total increase. No, the increased sale of this product was entirely due to a new home-made gadget known as "Radio." Radio, it was discovered, required a solenoid or wire wrapped upon a cylinder approximately four inches in diameter and about eight inches long.

When the art of radio advanced beyond the crystal set, and the oatmeal box was no longer a necessary component of a radio set, the manufacturers of Quaker Oats cast about for a new outlet for their package. Obviously the way to sell breakfast food was not for its food-value, but for the value of the box in which it came.

So, in the early middle years of the century, there came a well-loved character named Hopalong Cassidy, who portrayed the American Old West in the light of chivalry only a trifle less pure than that attributed to the knights of King Arthur. Hopalong Cassidy sold a billion dollars' worth of boxtops, foiled villains by the gross ton, and became so well loved by his followers that the game of Cowboy and Indian almost became extinct. Every youngster wanted to play the role of Cowboy Cassidy.

This economic idyl ended when the manufacturers (after selling spurs to fit on roller skates) ran out of

ideas and turned to a character known for years as Tom Corbett, Space Cadet.

The trouble with Tom Corbett was the same difficulty encountered by his early-century prototype, Frank Merriwell. One can be an undergraduate just so long before one gets to be known as the oldest undergraduate at Yale, or any other academy. The young of the race wanted a full-fledged Space Patrol, and eventually they got it.

Please meet Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol:

The sleek spacecraft landed, and the clouds of hot dust rose to becloud half of the scene, driven up by the fierceness of the reaction blast. A hundred yards from the patrol cruiser lay the broken ship of Roger Fulton, arch-fiend, cornered at last.

The spacelock opened and Dusty Britton looked out through the dangerous dust. He was dressed, as always, in dark breeches, calf-length black boots, wide belt, open-collared black shirt, and bare head. He was blondish with a wide-open face and a magnificent physique; narrow-waisted and broad-shouldered; slender-legged and agile-armed. At his hip swung the side-arm of the Space Patrol, a secret raygun more deadly than the .45 CAP in the hands of those who knew its handling. His arms were tanned from the radiations of space, his face lined with a million tiny wrinkles that were not natural to one so young and full of life, but were the well-earned price that one must pay to be Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol.

He took a step out onto the landing ramp, boldly ignoring the danger of radioactive dust kicked up from the landing of the patrol cruiser. His friend and sidekick called: "Dusty—be careful!"

Dusty laughed cheerfully. "I can make it fast—and safe!"

Then he leaped down into the billowing dust and almost passed through the cloud, as he raced across

the space between his cruiser and the broken ship of his arch-enemy, Roger Fulton.

(The Ward-Workman cameras followed him, bringing his full-sized three-dimensional figure to the watchers as, strong-limbed and righteously angry, he approached the other ship.)

Boldly he strode into the wrecked spacecraft and advanced down the corridor, kicking open the ruined door that barred his way to the control room. Then he faced Roger Fulton, who stood there darkly glowering, a cornered rat. Fulton was dark and swarthy and he wore a three-day beard; his clothing was stained and his hair unkempt. But Dusty was looking through the control room for more than Roger. Lorraine Mathews was more important to the patrolman than the cornered villain. She was there, tied and gagged; her eyes were eloquent and soft for Dusty as he came striding in.

With one eye on Roger, Dusty sidled into the control room and with his left hand he undid the knots that confined Lorraine. She sat there rubbing her wrists and her jaw, free and safe once more.

"Now," said Dusty harshly, "let's have it, Roger!"

"I should draw?" sneered the bandit. "I should gunfight the fastest man in the Space Patrol? Me—I surrender."

Very carefully, Roger's hand found the belt buckle and he unfastened it, to let the stolen Patrol blaster and its belt slide down one extended leg to the floor. He kicked it out of reach with a flick of his toe and stood there unarmed. "You'd not shoot an unarmed man."

Dusty Britton glowed with satisfaction. "I've wanted this chance," he said. With a magnificent gesture, he took his own blaster belt and tossed it aside. He stalked forward toward Roger Fulton, lithe and quick, his hands opening and closing in a cold suggestive manner. He brought his hands up in front of him and his left hand massaged the clenched knuckles of the right fist.

Roger Fulton laughed. "Sucker!" He went into a whirlwind of motion. His hand darted in between the lapels

of his open shirt and came snaking out with a tiny miniblast, ready for action.

There was a throbbing sound of raw energy and a blinding flash of light. Lorraine screamed as the yellowish cloud boiled up, around, and over the pair. She tried to struggle to her feet, but having been tied for hours, her muscles were numb; she fell helplessly back into the chair. The yellowish cloud billowed wider in the tiny control room.

Then out of the cloud walked Dusty Britton. He held his right hand by the wrist, shaking it with his left. "Stunned a bit," he grinned ruefully.

"But . . . ?" asked Lorraine, wonderingly.

Dusty opened the fingers of his right hand and dropped a miniblast onto the floor, its single charge gone, its usefulness ended. He turned and lifted the girl into his arms. "He tried the old hidden-gun trick," said Dusty. "But two can play that game. Roger Fulton will never menace honest men again."

Music swelled amid the cheers of Dusty's crew, just arrived, and the curtain closed on another epic of Dusty Britton and *The Space Patrol*.

There is more to Dusty Britton than this, now that he has been introduced. The myriad theatres that were showing the opus simultaneously, due to a hookup engineered by Martin Gramer, the producer, followed it with a variety of news items. One included Dusty Britton acting as referee to a juvenile football game; another was of Dusty Britton handing over a check for one million dollars to a popular charity, the amount being subscribed by the thousands of local units of Dusty Britton's Junior Space Patrol.

The final shot was delayed for live connections. The Ward-Workman film projectors stopped and the stage went black for a few seconds as the announcer said, "We bring you now a scene in action From White Sands, we see Dusty Britton himself!"

The coast-to-coast hookup flared blinding white upon

the screens of ten thousand theatres, went black for a second, and then flickered intermittently until point-to-point synchronization was established.

The scene was an open, sandy flat. Ringing the field were thousands of people, most of them Dusty Britton's junior club members. Small upon the stage, as it was small in the distance across the rocket field, stood a three-step ship, parked and waiting. Service cranes were clustered around it; tiny men scurried up and down the ladders, getting the three-stage rocket ready for space flight.

A flash and a thundering boom came from high above, and a sonorous voice announced, "*X Minus Thirty Minutes!*"

In the foreground was a small reviewing stand, and on it stood Dusty Britton, tall, handsome, open-faced. His hand was out and down towards a youngster just climbing the stairs to the platform. Dusty shook hands with the lad, who was dressed similarly, including the Dusty Britton "Blaster" that swung on his hip.

Then Dusty Britton turned abruptly to a man standing behind him and took a small plush-covered box, which he opened and held up to glitter in the lights. It was a small golden heart surrounded with rings like those of Saturn, coined in flat relief.

"Junior Spaceman Harold Fawcett, it is my pleasure to award you this Badge of Honor. I am informed that upon July Seventeenth, at Thirteen Hundred Hours Local Zone Time, you, young sir, aware of the dangers that threatened, did wade deep into the shifting sands of Mudlark Lake and from that dangerous place returned your smaller sister. For valor and for gallantry, Junior Spaceman, I present you with the Golden Heart!"

The roar that went up—not only from the theatres, but also from the space field—was deafening. Junior Spaceman saluted and turned stiffly, his face aglow. He went down the steps proudly.

Then Dusty turned from the reviewing stand and

stepped onto the back of an open car. The car drove slowly off towards the waiting spacecraft.

The crowd was still cheering when Dusty stepped from the car to the ladder, went up, and into the open spacelock.

Drawn in blazing colors above the spacelock were the words:

DUSTY BRITTON

THE SPACE PATROL

Martin Gramer Productions

It was nine o'clock in Hollywood, Eight in Denver, Seven in Chicago, and Six o'clock in the State of New York. The epic itself—and some of the short subjects—had been shown all around the world, starting with the International Date Line and working the hours around, combining times whenever the expanse of country permitted. In some locales it went on at Two in the afternoon and in other places even earlier. But Martin Gramer had bottled up the networks and the theatres thoroughly, including one beam to the orbital space station because (for publicity reasons) Martin Gramer claimed that the three youngsters there should not be deprived of Dusty Britton.

The presentation of the medal, and Dusty's embarkation had been well publicized, and this was no filmed show through the Ward-Workman cameras. This was live action through the television version of the Ward-Workman production, and wherever it was humanly possible, people were watching Dusty in person. Some of them had not seen the epic yet; others had seen it hours before. A couple of localities had seen the show "yesterday" by their own time-standard and were getting up early to see their hero take off for space.

Therefore it is not difficult to believe that those minutes between the presentation of the medal and the takeoff of the three-stage rocket were filled with more

admiration aimed at a single person at a particular time than had happened in many a century.

So Scyth Radnor, tinkering with his menslator on the darkside of Mercury, caught a whisper of a signal. He tuned his passband carefully, trying to peak it into one response strong enough to resolve into definitive thought, but the band was spread too wide, the thoughts were too diversified. They were young and vigorous, though, and with them they carried the fire of imagination. Scyth caught enough.

He went to the others soberly. "Inhabited," he said.

Bren Fallow nodded. Chat Honger scowled. Scyth said no more; he turned back to his menslator and turned up the gain. It radiated, for them, echoing the mish-mash of thoughts directed back and forth across the face of Terra. They listened to the ramble until Bren reached forward and turned it down.

Chat bowed to Fallow. "I pass," he said. "What do you make of it?"

Bren considered. "It's very vague, mixed-up, unclear. But I gather—hell, Chat, you're the one who needs convincing. You tell us what you make of it."

"All right, I'll eat crow. As best as I can make it out, the planet is teeming with people. There is a popular hero of many adventures called Dusty Britton—that much is very clear—who is some sort of officer in The Space Patrol. He is obviously loved by everybody, even the children. Or perhaps especially by children, but with the approval of their parents, who have a high regard for the man. Now—"

Radnor interrupted. "But how can they have a Space Patrol without some sort of space activity? We've not seen a smidgin of anything like that."

"You're thinking of phanoband drivers, Scyth. I get the impression that this space patrol uses chemical rockets, fortified by atomic energy."

"Lord, man, you're suggesting that these people ride tail burners? Skyrockets, no less? What a completely horrible idea."

Bren said, "Our forefathers lived through it."

Honger shook his head. "Not too many of them. Besides, where can these people go?"

"There's a lot of planets around this sun. Go read your History of Marandis, Chat. You'll find that we spent several hundred years working back and forth across interplanetary space in the chemical reaction rocket, fortified with atomic energy."

"But they couldn't have colonized the other planets."

Fallow smiled wanly. "Not yet," he agreed. "Not colonies. I did not get a single impression that was not based upon Planet Three."

"How can you tell that?"

Bren smiled confidently. "I was looking a bit deeper. In all peoples there is a rather deep appreciation of time. Time, as you know, is always geared to the home planet, even in clusters where there are hundreds of suns only an hour or two separate from one another. I saw no evaluation of time that was not in accord with all the rest, all geared to one timeline sense. But let's drop this futile argument for the present, and decide what to do next."

"That's simple," said Chat.

Radnor objected. "How can they have a space patrol with no colonies and—since they're using chemical rockets—not much space travel?"

Chat Honger chuckled. "If you were running an outfit like that, and wanted to capture the public fancy so that governmental appropriations would come a bit easier, would you call The High-Altitude Investigation Group? It might be wishful thinking on their part, but I'm inclined to call it deep foresightedness. No use picking a name you have to change as soon as you achieve your desire, Scyth."

"So, go on, Chat."

"It's simple, as I said. Our job is complicated by having found this primitive race. Luckily they haven't made the job impossible by having developed space travel to the colony point. So the obvious thing to do

is to get a line on this Dusty Britton, and let him prepare the ground for the completion of our job here. Britton obviously has the regard of most of the race. He must be an intelligent, far-sighted man, able to grasp a vast plan. He will be able to sway people. We'll make him our emissary and let him have the credit, and someday when the time is really ripe, he'll be the man responsible for the joining of their race with the rest of the galactics."

"Only one correction, Chat. You say 'his race' when you know they must be ours."

"It doesn't seem possible."

"Oh pahl! You know we've never found another sentient culture that was not of our own race."

"Then how did it get here?"

"We've been seeking an open route from the center to Cluster Six Ninety Three for a long time," said Fallow. "Someone must have found it and then been space-wrecked. Unable to call for help, they just reverted to savagery due to lack of economic support. They've been rising ever since."

"Nice theory. Maybe valid. Okay, so what do we do about it?"

Bren smiled confidently. "We get in touch with this Dusty Britton of the Space Patrol and explain the entire situation to him. He'll do whatever is necessary for them. We'll just go on with out work. We've a beacon to set up, you know."

"Right. Shall we let Scyth handle Britton?"

"Why not? Scyth is handiest with the menslator and all the rest of the technical gear. Scyth, think you can get a mental fix on Britton?"

"As soon as I get close to Planet Three. Not from here."

"Take the ship and go," directed Fallow. "You know what to do."

CHAPTER III

Dusty Britton entered the lower cabin of the three-stage rocket and flopped into a chair. "Quite a show," he said with a trace of ill nature.

Martin Gramer, producer of the long series of Dusty Britton pictures, puffed his cigar and nodded. "Not bad. Not bad at all."

"Gramer, how long is this nonsense going to go on?"

"Until you're ready to retire."

"I'm ready now."

"For good?"

"I *could* do something else. After all, I am an—"

Martin Gramer eyed the husky young man with derision. "You say 'Actor' and I'll blow a gasket."

"Then what am I doing here?" roared Dusty.

"You're here because you have an honest-looking face and a pair of broad shoulders to go with it. You're the living embodiment of John Darling Trueheart, and you can act the part, providing some bright guy lays out the floor plan and coaches you."

"Why not hire the bright guy?"

"Because his face would scare children, and he has the physique of a lame fieldmouse. But if you were taken out of that hero role, you'd fall so flat on your face that people would be calling you Old Doormat. Now pull out of it, Dusty. Just be glad you've got hold of a good thing and stop looking for something you couldn't handle."

Britton got up out of his chair angrily. "I suppose you think it's fun to have to go roaming around the country wearing this flanged-up surveyor's uniform, with a three-pound chunk of rusty iron clanking on my hip."

"To date they've sold three and a quarter million replicas of that Dusty Britton Blaster you're so contemptuous of, and you've received ten cents for every replica that crossed the counter. What's so bad about that?"

"I feel silly."

Gramer roared with laughter, then calmed down and glared at Britton. "What's silly about being a model of honor and respect for several million kids?"

"D'ye ever think how imbecilic it sounds to be Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol, with no space to patrol, wearing a blaster that doesn't blast? And wearing a pack of medals stamped out in the model shop? What does it all add up to?"

Martin Gramer tossed the stump of his cigar at the disposal chute. "It adds up to a lot, Dusty. It adds up to a damned good living for you, and to—maybe something you're too dumb to understand—being an ideal. Damn it, man, there's millions of kids in this world that eat, think, and dream about the Space Patrol and Dusty Britton. You're an idol as well as an ideal, Dusty. Kids follow a big name man. It's a darned sight better if they follow an ideal rooted in good and strength and honesty and chivalry, than if they try to emulate characters like Shotgun Hal or Joseph Oregon."

"Yeah," drawled Dusty, "but do you know what it means?"

"You tell me your version, Dusty—just as if I hadn't heard your gripe before."

Britton took a deep breath and opened his mouth but then closed it again. He said, quietly but disgustingly, "Why waste my breath? Dusty Britton doesn't smoke. Dusty Britton drinks soda pop and milk. The only women in Dusty Britton's life are his aged mother and his younger sister. Dusty Britton's biggest gamble is when he offers to bet a Saturnstone on this or that. Gramer, do you realize that I can't even date a gal for a dance because 'Kids don't care for the mush stuff' and my private life is not my own? I can't even swear!"

"You seem to get along."

"Sure. I get along. When I shuck this monkey suit and dress like a human being. But you know what happens? When I turn up at some place, do I get introduced as *The Dusty Britton*? No—I'm treated like any of the rest of the tourists. Herded like cattle to the rear seats, while a tomato like Gloria Bayle comes in and gets everything on the house."

"You make my heart bleed, Dusty."

"Your heart never bled anything but vouchers." Britton fumbled in his hip pocket and pulled out a flask.

Gramer did not say a word.

"Well, aren't you going to object?" demanded Dusty.

"No. You can't be seen."

"But someone's likely to smell bourbon on my breath."

"No one who counts. And by the time we get back..."

Dusty stopped, the flask in midair. "Get back?" he roared. "Get back! Look, Gramer..."

"Sit down, Dusty. Take it easy."

"Gramer, what goes on here? You're not suggesting that we take off in this fire-breathing hot water boiler, are you?"

"You've read all the advertisements."

"Yeah, but nobody with sense would take ad-writer's copy for anything but guff."

Outside, a voice thundered, "*X Minus Five Minutes!*"

"Ye Gods, you're really going through with this mad-man's publicity scheme?"

Gramer smiled. "Sure. It's just a round-trip orbit to Venus; but you can bet your life that every kid who sees this takeoff on video, or here on the field, will be dreaming of what adventures you'll be having. Those kids think this is for real, Dusty. You can't let 'em down!"

"So it is just a trip to Venus?"

"Sure. But those kids think you're out to have another adventure with The Space Patrol, taking actual pictures of—"

"Include me elsewhere!" Britton started for the spacelock.

"You can't let those kids down!"

Dusty paused at the sill of the spacelock. "Gramer, I'm not letting anybody down. I'm just keeping the hide of Dusty Britton in one unscarred piece."

"But the public . . ."

"That's what you've got press agents for, Gramer. I won't ride a rocket into space, so you can get your high-priced press-agents to run a few miles of paper explaining how I happen to have left this shooting star four minutes before takeoff!"

"Dusty, you're a no-good louse."

"But a whole one. And let me tell you this, Gramer. You're less worried about the state of youthful morals than you are about losing the thread of a good, high-selling series. So I'm going to sail out of here as if I were scared to death of rockets—which I sure am—and you're going to tell some bright explainer to get busy earning the dough you pay him. And when the smoke is all cleared away, I'll be safe, you'll be safe, Dusty Britton will continue to go rolling along, and the box office will continue to come rolling in."

"But Dusty—"

"Space? Bahl Nothing, floating gently from vacuum to void and back again. Not for Dusty Britton!"

Dusty paused long enough to run splayed fingers through his hair and then he headed for the spacelock with a determined step.

"Wait!" roared Gramer.

Dusty paused.

"The least you could do is to go out of here not looking like Dusty Britton. I'll cover for you, but you've got to help!"

"All right but—" Outside, the amplifier announced, "*X Minus Three Minutes!*" and startled Dusty with the realization that he did not have much time, "—make it quick!"

"You—there—!"

A technician coming up the ladder looked startled.

"Fifty bucks to swap clothing with Britton, here."

"Done." The man started to peel. He balked at Dusty's famous Blaster. "That's worth another . . ."

"Another fifty, dammit!" agreed Gramer. "Now, wave out the door while the technician leaves the place!"

The roar that went up was for their beloved hero waving out of the spacelock, not the technician who raced down the ramp, followed by the portly Martin Gramer. The spacelock swung closed as the spaceport jeep, that had been awaiting Gramer, pulled away with Dusty and Gramer in the back.

They were a half mile away when the thundering roar came. No one noticed them wending their way through the crowd; every eye on the field was looking upwards, straining to see the spacecraft that was carrying Dusty Britton and The Space Patrol off to new adventures.

CHAPTER IV

Scyth Radnor took off, expecting momentarily that the point-of-aim of his flanged-up menslator would begin to change. It did not. It kept its eye right on Terra and it stayed there all the way from the darkside of Mercury to Terra.

Scyth eyed Terra with some suspicion. He did not want to go barging in with his superdriven spacecraft, scaring the natives and creating all sorts of ambitions and desires that they were obviously not ready to assume. The license the trio held to establish a beacon did not cover native exploitation. Before Radnor started any kind of dealings with the natives for commercial purposes, he would have a lot of ground to prepare.

Besides, Scyth Radnor wasn't interested in commercial contact. He wanted to establish a beacon and go on about the rest of his preferred work. His personal ideas on the subject were simple: Let someone else run the front of the store.

So Scyth was gratified to discover that the big interstellar spacecraft was aiming at a nondescript spot a number of miles southwest of what the natives would call Baja California. He eyed the menslator carefully and checked it; then finding that it was right, he hovered aloft and watched cautiously. For hours he hung up in the sky and tracked his target, which was moving southward.

Radnor picked a spot some miles ahead of the moving target and dropped the big spacecraft into the ocean. He let it hang with the observation dome barely awash and waited for his target to come to him.

Scyth blinked.

Loafing across the water, with its lee rail almost awash, came a very neat schooner of about thirty five feet waterline. Radnor missed the stainless steel stays and the nylon sails and the vertical whip of coast-guard-band radio antenna. He missed the efficient fittings, and saw only the white sails billowing in the wind. He was used to phanoband generators, but he knew that this culture had none. He was almost prepared to see atomic power here, and he expected to see rockets. Electricity was a certainty and steam must definitely be in the past history of a race that used rockets and had a Space Patrol.

But sails! Wind power?

Scyth was a logical man. He realized that there is a reason for everything, and that everything—no matter how bizarre, was logical in some way—even if only to a single person.

Then he saw something that took his mind from sails and wind power—and logic.

Dusty Britton was sitting lazily on the seat near the wheel, smoking a cigarette and keeping the wheel steady

with his left foot. He reached out, took the bottle in his hand and held it high against the light. With a shrug he tossed it overboard and then he put the palm of the hand beside his mouth and called, "Hey! Snooky! Get us another quart, will you?"

It was Snooky that Scyth Radnor saw. She was lying on a blanket a-top the cabin, when Dusty's call came. She rolled over and sat up, calling back, "Out of it already?" It was this motion that caught Radnor's eye.

"Yop!"

"Okay, Dusty." She got to her feet and walked across the cabin top. She leaped to the deck in the cockpit with a graceful bounce, and disappeared. She came out a moment later and made her way aft with a bottle under her arm.

She was a tall girl, dark-haired and slender. Her skin was tanned and she was showing a number of square feet of it, darker by far than the dazzling white shark-skin shorts and bra she wore. Scyth whistled inadvertently.

Barbara Crandall steadied herself against a stay and handed the bottle to Dusty. The ship rolled ever-so-slightly, and she stood there swaying prettily to the roll.

Dusty Britton stood up—and this was the first time Scyth had seen enough of him to realize that there was another on board.

Dusty poured a drink for himself and looked at Barbara with lifted eyebrows. She nodded, and ran gracefully back to the cabin top to get her glass. Dusty poured for her and they sat on the edge of the cockpit side by side, shoulder against shoulder.

"Nice," she said. Her voice was mellow and pleasant.

"Like it, Barbara?"

"Wonderful. So quiet, and sort of clean and peaceful."

"Yeah. Well, here's to the Space Patrol."

Barbara laughed. "What're you supposed to be doing?"

"Darned if I know," he said. "Maybe doing research for *The Space Patrol Meets Moby Dick*."

"You'd better hope that The Space Patrol doesn't catch you all at sea with me."

"Phooey." He turned his face to her, and Barbara replied by giving him a tiny peck on the lips.

"You'd be cashiered," she told him. "A member of The Space Patrol consorting with a woman! Rank heresy!"

"What was good enough for pappy is good enough for me."

Dusty made a reach for her but she danced back out of reach. Then Dusty went after her and Barbara turned and ran, laughing, towards the bow of the ship, with Dusty in full chase. He caught her near the bowsprit and clung to her with one hand, steadying them both with the other hand against a forestay.

She relaxed against him, swaying with the roll of the ship, which had lost its helm and was starting to weathercock. "What are we heading for?"

"Island dead ahead," he said. "If it's the one I think it is there's a nice clean beach. Like?"

Barbara looked forward, shading her eyes against the sun. "Island? You don't mean that hummock over there?"

"Hummock? Hummock—my Lord; what's that?"

The hummock, dome of the spacecraft, suddenly rose up out of the sea. Yard after yard came upward glistening wet, running in rivulets down the slightly bowed flanks as the metal-white monster emerged from the sea. It rose ponderously, steady as rock, yet with a sort of feather-lightness; this was no normal rocketship, straining and vibrating as its reactor struggled valiantly against the force of gravity. This was a monster, with the power of forces unknown held in quiet leash, its motors idling, contemptuous of the feeble thing called gravity. It was no ship of Terra.

Up it came until the hundreds of yards towered high, until the round spacelock was above the waterline by a foot or two. Then it stopped, obviously poised on its unknown drive.

The schooner turned bowsprit-on to the spacelock and

started to move through the sea. The sails billowed back against the gentle pressure; they were moving faster than the sea wind.

Dusty Britton swore and raced aft. He kicked the starter of the auxiliary and as the engine roared into life, he loosed the halyards and let the sails fall loose. He turned the helm hard a-starboard and goosed the throttle.

The schooner leaped forward under the combined force of the racing screw—and whatever force was drawing them to the monstrous spacecraft. But the schooner ignored its rudder.

Dusty swore again and raced for the cabin. With gnawing fear and growing impatience he waited until the tubes in the radio warmed, until the ages passed endlessly while the sluggish output meter rose across the scale to the red line that meant that the transmitter was ready to be operated. Then he grabbed the microphone:

"Help! Help!" he roared into the mike. "This is Dusty Britton. Calling from the schooner *Buccaneer*, about a hundred miles southwest of the tip of Baja California. We are attacked by an alien spacecraft! Help! Help! This is . . ."

He let his voice trail away. The output meter had dropped to zero.

Dumbly frightened, filled with a sense of futility, Dusty turned from the dead radio and made his way back to the deck. A man stood in the open spacelock of the gigantic spacecraft with a fluted-barrelled object in his hand; on the schooner's deck, some hot droplets of copper sizzled against the varnish and sent up tiny streamers of whitish smoke. The radio antenna was gone. Only a six-inch stump remained and the end of the stump was blobbed and turned down back against itself; bright-burned copper showed on the blobbed end.

"Please," said Scyth Radnor, "do not be frightened. I am here on a friendly mission."

"Who the hell are you?" demanded Dusty. The enor-

mity of this alien being speaking English had not had time to register. It might have registered if Britton had been more of a student of the conjecture-type of thought, where things alien were portrayed as honestly as the writer was able. But in his movies, all aliens spoke English, with precise grammar.

"I am Scyth Radnor. I've come to help you, Dusty Britton."

Dusty's ego did not let him be astounded that a man in a strange spacecraft from God-knows-where should call him by name. "Why the . . . ?" Words failed him, and he pointed at the burned-off antenna.

The schooner had come up against the side of the spacecraft and turned, so that one rail was facing the spacelock. The same force that had drawn it close now held the rail a foot or two distant from the plank of the ship, but it also held the schooner immobile with respect to the spacecraft; the danger of crushing a rail was gone, but the danger of springing the hull had increased. Scyth Radnor stooped and sat on the lower edge of his spacelock to let his heels dangle close to the water. He knew the value of a relaxed pose in dealing with a suspicious man.

Radnor pointed at the antenna. "Sorry," he said. "That was a necessary measure. You see, I know your kind, Dusty. Had I landed in the middle of one of your civilization centers, there would have been quite an uproar—perhaps violence, which would only lead to more violence. I had to meet you alone. I also had to see to it that you did not carry back an erroneous opinion of me."

"So? Where did you come from and what do you want?"

"My home planet is Marandis. I couldn't translate its distance into terms you'd recognize without quite a bit of study of your accepted standards of measurements. If you can take a comparison, Marandis is about one quarter of the total diameter of the galaxy distant, al-

most dead-true toward the galactic center. Can you grasp that?"

"No."

"Let it sink in, then. It'll come later."

"Why are you here? What do you want?"

Scyth Radnor smiled indulgently. "I doubt that you have much of what we want." His eyes drifted towards Barbara and he smiled. "At least, anything that you'd care to part with. As to my mission, that's simple. We are here to establish a beacon for space travel."

"Beacon?" blurted Dusty.

"Certainly. Does that surprise you?"

"I don't see . . ."

Scyth laughed. "You've got to forget your planet-bound concepts, Dusty. Your struggle with chemico-atomic rocket motors, as you try to get into interplanetary space—forever (you think) frustrated by the relativity equations that will not let you contemplate interstellar flight—tends to prohibit thinking of the real problems of galactic travel. You look into your night sky and point out your destinations for the future. You know where they are, and you know how long it will take you in free flight to get there. Before you take off for one of your perilous trips, you have every factor computed except the very minor factors of dispersion of aim, and the error of instrument inaccuracy—both of which can be corrected once in practical flight. Understand?"

"Frankly, no."

Scyth blinked. Was this Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol? Even granting the inefficiencies of chemico-atomic propulsion, no man could be a member of a space patrol without knowing the basic problems of space flight. Oh—of course! What Dusty was puzzled about was not his own problem, but the comparison-problem. Not understanding that there is another problem, Dusty could not fathom the possibility of a relationship.

So Scyth Radnor went on: "In galactic travel," he said, "we cannot often see our destination. Marandis is

probably visible from here only through your most powerful telescopes, and then it is lost amid a million other stars in the field of the 'scope. Yes, we know the direction to a fine degree of aim, but just consider what a fraction of a millisecond of error-arc will do to an aim at galactic distances. Then there is another point. Marandis is semi-obsured by other suns lying along the course, by dust clouds and by galactic warps in the continuum. Why, until we found this rift through the galaxy, the course between Marandis and the star cluster that lies at the end of this spiral arm was three times as long and had more than eighteen dog-legs. We can cut the travel-time by days, now that we have this rift. So we establish beacons to mark the course."

"It seems to me—"

Scyth held up a hand. "I know what you're going to say. Why not come aboard and relax?" He reached back inside and touched a button. A small runway slipped out, reached across the intervening feet, and slid onto the deck of the schooner with about a quarter inch of clearance. Radnor stood up and held out a hand for Barbara; Dusty followed uncertainly.

Scyth led them into the salon of the big spacecraft and went behind a small bar. "Drink? What'll you have?"

Dusty eyed the array of bottles and smiled. This was his language. The offer of refreshment seemed to be the offer of friendship. "What have you got?"

Scyth laughed. He touched a little case hanging at his belt. "This gadget is what we call a menslator," he said. "It is always used in speaking to people on planets other than our own. And sometimes it's used even there, because 'cold' to a man of the tropical zones has a different intrinsic meaning than the same word when used by a man from the polar regions. But the menslator is not worth a hoot when it comes to regional nouns. I'll demonstrate: This" he said as he reached for a bottle, "is an alcoholic distillate of fermented sugar. We call it rum. What do you call it?"

"Rum."

Scyth reached down and took hold of the tiny switch on the menslator. "In our language it is called" (Snap! Off) "'pylag'" (Snap! On!) "but because the menslator actually transliterates generic terms, you hear the word as 'rum'. That's because you can find the alcoholic distillation of fermented sugar everywhere in the galaxy, and everybody has a word for it. On the other hand, unfortunately, we have a beverage which is strictly indigenous to the planet Fallensia, and many attempts have been made to reproduce it. Doubtless you may have a regional liquor made of the same stuff, called by a different name—a name which is untranslatable because it really means a substance from a certain district, which can have no meaning anywhere else. Have you?"

"There's scotch and bourbon and cognac."

"So what'll you have?"

"Bourbon."

"You'll take fallensia, and you'll like it." Radnor poured and Britton tried it. It had a flavor unlike any Terran liquor he had ever tasted. He raised an eyebrow and nodded at Barbara.

"Sort of like Canadian whiskey and vodka mixed," she said.

"You must try bourbon," suggested Dusty. "I'll go get . . ."

"Later. Relax a moment. We've got to get along with this."

Barbara eyed Radnor humorously. "Tell me, Scyth, how do you—is it menslate?—the concept of 'Go to Hell?'"

"It is a colloquial consignment to the region of theological punishment, and it comes out 'Go to Hell' in any tongue." He snapped the switch again and said, "Fa d Snall!"

Then Scyth turned his menslator on and smiled. "But this is getting us nowhere. My real reason here is to help you to understand. We're putting a beacon here."

"Why here, and what is a beacon?" asked Dusty taking a sip of fallensia.

"Here, because your sun lies at the end of a long open course through the galaxy, the continuation of which lies along a change in course."

"Go on."

"You've got to consider it properly. The next time you're in a forest, look through the trees and see how many directions there are that you can really penetrate for a long distance. Sometimes you can see a sliver of light through the trees, and sometimes you can't. But a little investigation might show that a dead line of sight would be the quickest way to open land, if you take it to the blocking tree and then veer to one side. If you were God, Dusty, you could stand with the galaxy on your desk, take a broomstraw and lay out the open courses through the galaxy. But we are not God, so we have to explore and search, and lay out our routes as we find them."

"And what is a beacon?"

"It is a phenomenon caused by the doppler effect when travelling at galactic speeds. In this case, when coming through this rift at fifteen hundred light years per hour, a three-day variable star will appear to the observer as a rapidly blinking light."

CHAPTER V

Dusty slammed his glass of fallensia down on the bar so hard that the glass shattered and the liquor splashed wide. "Three-day variable!" he roared. "Three-day variable? My God, Radnor, you mean to say you . . . ?" Britton's voice trailed away uncertainly.

"Yes," nodded Radnor. "We use the three-day variable to denote the galactic travel lanes. Very effective. We use the longer variable types for other things—dangerous

places like cloud-drifts, or a dead sun that might be as deadly to a spacecraft as a hidden shoal is to a seagoing vessel. It's all very logical, you see."

"I don't see!"

"Take it easy. I suppose you cannot see, but it's as I said. You've never encountered the questions, let alone considering the answers. For instance, Dusty, what is the brightest star in your sky?"

"Sirius."

"And where is Sirius?"

Dusty shrugged. "I'd have to go look it up. If you really want to know, I've got a navigator's guide in the yacht."

"That's not necessary. Your terms would mean little to me, and they're not necessary for the argument. What I had in mind was this: You know which star is the brightest. You also recognize that star in the North Polar axis."

"I know Polaris, and the Pointers, and others."

"Let's get back to your Sirius. Do you know any more about it?"

Dusty Britton and The Space Patrol had chased villains in "Pirates of the Dog Star" and so he now reeled off data about its distance, luminosity, and a couple of other popular characteristics.

Scyth Radnor nodded sagely. "But were you moved ten of your light years more distant from Sirius, its apparent brightness would drop. Perhaps you would have a telescope to sight it, to see if it is truly a double star with a dark companion. Maybe you have a spectromatch—that's a poor menslation, Dusty, but it means a spectrograph device with a cardfile index, which whips through a catalog to locate the stars with any received spectrogram. Yet, even with these precision instruments, you would not know which star in the lonely heavens to point your things at! Oh, you might be able to guess. Constellations should not change too much within ten light year distance. That would bring you down to a

couple of hundred stars to look at. But I see that you're beginning to get the point."

"Could be."

"Good. I knew you would, once the problem was outlined. You have spent thousands of years knowing just where Sirius is. You flip open a book and set your telescopes blind by using the listed settings. *Then* you look at Sirius. But face it—Sirius is no more than a featureless bright pinpoint. So now picture yourself five thousand light years away, where the constellations are distorted beyond recognition. Which way lies your home, Dusty? On what line lies your course?"

"But you're going to make a variable star out of Sol, just for this?"

Scyth Radnor shook his head. "Please do not think us hard. We'll do everything to make your lot easier. But you see, it is extremely necessary that we . . ."

"Why?"

"Come, Dusty, you're not going to insist that your own animal comfort is more important than the functioning of a galaxy-wide civilization?"

"I don't consider living near a three-day variable is very comfortable . . ."

"Oh, without our aid, you couldn't live at all. That's why I've come to help you."

"Thanks." Dusty Britton looked at Scyth Radnor curiously. "Doesn't the fact that we have a civilization here mean anything to that galaxy-wide combine of yours?"

"Of course. That's why we're here to help. Oh, we'd not turn your Sol into a lane-beacon knowing that there was life on one of its planets. We've no license for that, and I doubt that we could get one."

"Well. Good for the license bureau with a heart."

Radnor ignored the gibe. "It wouldn't work at all," he said thoughtfully. "First of all, a furore would arise. The bureau would have to take it up with the Bureau of Census, so that a search could be made for former evidences. From that, any number of things could happen."

"Just for instance?" asked Dusty, too-politely,

"Well, since it is quite obvious that you are of the same basic racial stock as we are, it is equally obvious that at some time in the past one of our explorers, or wanderers, or travellers landed on your earth and became space-wrecked. Now, if the pioneer had been one of my own company, we'd be all right. But by the time the search was made, all the other transgalactic shipping companies would be in on the fact that we had discovered a profitably short passage. Our beacon would do us little good, from a company standpoint."

Barbara finished her drink and set the glass down pointedly. "If we could get to your Marand's, we'd put a pin in your balloon."

Scyth smiled. "Could be. Then the beacon would be set up by the Bureau of Celestial Navigation, and we would get a standard fee for discovering it."

"And what if this early pioneer happened to have been working for a rival outfit?"

"Oh, in that case the license would be the source of a lawsuit. The beacon would still be established by Navigation, but the discovery fee would go to the rival concern. Not all of it—just the primary rights. There would be some lawsuit," chuckled Scyth. "One side would claim pioneer rights, the other side claiming undeveloped resources. The fee would ultimately be divided equitably. But I doubt that the suit would be finished by the time you folks came out of it."

"So no matter what we do, we've got a three-day variable in our backyard?"

Scyth finished his own drink, and then graciously poured drinks for the others. He ignored Dusty's broken glass as he set a fresh one before the actor.

Britton took a deep gulp. "Scyth, haven't you got a Bureau of Commerce?"

"Of course. We have a bureau of everything."

"Seems to me," said Dusty quietly, "that it would take a dim view of running a potential source of commerce."

"Sure would."

"Then . . ."

"But, you see, you're no real source of revenue."

"Now see here!" exploded Dusty. Then he lowered his voice. "I mean—you've called us primitive and you've sneered at our poor efforts. But do you mean to stand there and tell me that we have nothing to offer you? *Nothing* to buy or sell?"

"Nothing that can't be had elsewhere and easier."

"You mean we haven't enough wealth to buy one of those—what did you call 'em?—phanoband things?"

Scyth looked at Britton soberly. "I'm sorry, Dusty. You've recently solidified your own cluttered planet politically. You're just on the first ragged steps of getting along. If we sold anybody a phanoband unit, war would break out within six weeks, just because of internal pressure. There are probably whole districts of your people who are living peacefully only because they haven't the power to stick out their collective chin. No, until you evolve a bit more we cannot begin to discuss commerce with you."

"You wouldn't have to start with your phanobands."

"There's little else. Doubtless you have backward regions, too, Dusty. Consider how you'd view selling an aboriginal population radio sets and television viewers. Electric lamps and the like. Could they use 'em?"

"They might if we sold 'em the juice, too."

"That's the point. Our own household comforts are all geared to use metered phanoband emissions. But you and your kind wouldn't really be happy with a device that makes music or shows pictures. You want the rifle of civilization, and atom bomb of a technical culture, the—hah! Can't even mention it, Dusty."

"We've had atom bombs for a long time."

"Sure you have, and you got 'em when your kind was ready to realize just how devastating they could be. But name me an earlier war—say, for neutrality's sake, one in which your own country was not involved."

"Well, er . . ." Dusty's voice faded away as lamely as his knowledge of pre-atomic history.

Barbara said, "There's the Franco-Prussian War, or the Russo-Japanese War."

"Four countries? Well, then," said Radnor thoughtfully. "Suppose that one of those four countries had been handed the hydrogen bomb at that time. Suppose they could have bought hydrogen bombs from someone like us. Do you like the picture?"

"No."

"All right. Then let's stop all this hopeful talk about commerce with us until you are ready to handle phanoband power without getting your fingers burned."

"So in the meantime, we suffer under a variable star?"

"That's why I'm here," said Scyth Radnor.

Dusty eyed the Marandanian sourly. "You've been repeating that all along. Suppose you tell me how any race is going to get along under a star that's breathing up and down ten times its brightness or more every three days?"

"This is where you come in," said Scyth. "You, we happen to know, are a well-loved leader in your own land, and in others. You are to go back to your people and prepare them. You are to lead them carefully, teach them wisely, and begin the long, slow process of growing up into a powerful and integrated community."

Dusty shook his head. Barbara looked at them both with considerable puzzlement.

Britton said, "I'm supposed to go back home and tell them that a gang of celestial spaceline operators are going to make a blink-beacon out of Sol? *I'm—*"

"You'll go to prepare against panic and hysteria."

"And get my fool Lead laughed off."

"Not at all. You have the power of leadership."

"Look, one peep out of me, and . . ."

"It won't harm you," said Radnor. "You've just got to be prepared."

"Being prepared to have a tooth out without anaesthetic doesn't make it hurt any less."

Scyth held up a hand. "You don't understand. You can't live under a variable sun."

"Then come along and tell us how you're going to help."

"I can't. I've far too much of my own work to do. Furthermore, we've found it best to have a member of the culture explain things. Hatred is too easily aroused when a stranger comes in to tell you what's what. You, on the other hand, can rise higher than ever before by becoming a leader during a trying time. You'll be forewarned with knowledge, and forearmed with the ability to carry on. You'll have foresight, too, Dusty, in being able to predict great things for your people afterwards."

"Oh, fine."

"I've got a few questions to ask."

"You? I thought you knew everything."

"No, I don't. What I want to know is how many of your planets have you colonized—I am right in assuming that this is the cradle of your civilization, am I not?"

"This earth is our home planet. As for colonies, we have none—yet."

"Outposts?"

"None—yet."

"Not even on your own moon?" asked Scyth incredulously.

"It's airless, and therefore useless. We've landed on it but nobody cared to stay. We've landed on Mars and on Venus, too. But we can't take enough stuff with us for a prolonged stay."

"Then that makes it quite easy. Far easier than I'd expected."

"Oh?"

"Yes. We expected a mass migration. Now we won't have any. We won't have even an argument with the Bureau."

"Look," said Dusty testily, "why don't you come along with me and tell the people all this yourself? They won't raise any more hell with you than they will with me."

"Because I can't really take a thousand years out of the middle of my life."

"And I can, I suppose? Or have you made another

mistake and assumed that we live much longer than we do?"

"You'll hardly miss it. You'll have all your friends and relatives. But if I went along, all my people would be dead and gone, and then I'd be almost as bad as you are now."

"How so?" asked Barbara.

"Why, we advance steadily, just as you have been doing. Now take a man of your planet, who lived a thousand years ago—if you put him in the middle of one of your cities, what would he do?"

"Go off his rocker."

"I'd hardly do that, but I'd sure be lost. Anyway, you've nothing to lose. It'll be painless and quick, and . . ."

"A thousand years, quick?"

"Yes. We put a barytrine field around Earth, and tow the planet to some star similar to Sol. The barytrine field is a sort of time stasis—we don't know all about them yet but we're learning—which will make it seem as though there were a sudden cosmic wink. And as quick as a wink to you, you'll be safe from your variable sun and rotating around a nice stable one."

"With a thousand years out of the middle of our lives."

"You won't notice it."

"No?"

"No," echoed Scyth Radnor cheerfully. "You won't notice it. In fact, you might be of help to our scientists. We've got maybe a half dozen planets in the barytrine field right now and without a doubt there are a couple of dozen more, controlled by other companies. They're all helping."

"How?"

"As I say, we don't know much more about the barytrine field other than the fact that it works. It stops all time—not dead-still, but damned near. So you set up careful measurement devices and attempt to measure the interval between the blink. I assure you that if you were to drop a marble just before the barytrine field goes on,

it will land after the field is off and you have traversed a thousand years."

"And by then your outfit will know all there is to this barytrine field?"

"We hope so."

"Damnit, *no!*" roared Dusty. Down came the glass again, and fallensia splashed.

"Why not?"

"Look. You were complaining about being left a thousand years behind your own people. We're on the verge of space travel in earnest right now. It shouldn't be many years—maybe only a hundred—until we're on the verge of our first interstellar ship, now that we know that such is possible. So we'll be a thousand years behind what we're behind already? That isn't fair."

"Life isn't fair," agreed Radnor, sorrowfully. "But you can rest assured that you'll get more than a fair break once you achieve proper contact."

"Seems to me that you could do a lot right now."

"We'd rather not take advantage of you."

"Thanks," replied Dusty drily. "What makes you think we are so naive?"

"Ignorant, not naive. You just don't know the value of things outside of your experience. And we have people who would swap you something useless for something useful. Doubtless you have people who have done the same."

Dusty's hazy impression of History showed him a costume-drama of Sir Walter Raleigh passing over a ten, two fives, and four ones to Chief Sitting Bull and receiving an engraved bill of sale for the property of Greater New York. The negotiators clinched the deal with a drink poured from a bourbon bottle labelled "bottled in bond." He nodded.

Scyth went on: "So you, Dusty Britton, as a high official in The Space Patrol, must go to your leaders and start preparing the people for the sudden change. We'll do our best to place your Planet Earth *in situ*—I mean by this that we will carefully measure the axis-angle, and

the orbital position, so that when the barytrine field goes off the new sun will occupy the same position in the sky as the old sun did at the time the field went on. The instant of time, solar-wise, will be the same. This goes for season, too, of course. Naturally, we won't be able to hit it to the inch, so it will appear as though the sun had taken an unprecedented leap across the sky.

"But this is not the main problem, Dusty. Consider the people on Earth's night side. No matter how careful we are to set your planet *in situ* around your new sun, we can do nothing about the stars. One moment, the stars will be in their age-old familiar positions, and the next moment there will be nothing at all familiar about the sky. This will cause hysteria if the people are not forewarned. Furthermore, the people on day side, shocked by the sudden jump of the sun, will follow the same hysteria as soon as night falls and they see an unfamiliar sky. You'll have to work against this sort of thing, Dusty Britton."

"Is . . . er . . ."

"You must. That's why I'm here. But you'll understand how to handle it, now that I've explained. So—" Radnor looked at his watch and made a quick mental calculation. "—I must say good-bye, Dusty Britton. I wish you good luck. I'm rather sorry I can't stick around to help," he added with a sweeping look at Barbara Crandall. "You folks look as though you had fun. But I must go back to work. You'll make out all right."

Scyth led them to the spacelock and then waved them across the gangplank to their schooner. He waved them good-bye; then, abruptly, the schooner was freed of the rock-like grasp so that it floated free, rolling in the swell of the sea.

The spacelock closed, and the monstrous spacecraft started to lift up. Effortlessly it rose until its tail was free of the water; then, with mind-stunning swiftness, it whistled up into the high blue sky and disappeared within a second.

CHAPTER VI

Scyth Radnor landed by the bubble on Mercury's dark-side. Chat Honger greeted him with a question about his success and Scyth smiled. "Naturally, they didn't cotton to it," he said. "No one ever would."

Chat nodded agreement. "They wouldn't stand in the path of advancement, would they?"

Scyth chuckled. "I'm getting to be something of a diplomat. Not good, but I think adequate."

"Yes?"

"Sure. First I told them about the beacon and let them ask questions about it to whet their curiosity. Then I explained what the beacon was, which horrified them completely, as it should. Then, after letting them cook in their fright for some time, I let them down easy by explaining how we would help to save them. So now there's nothing to do but to finish off the job."

"Right. How long will it take for you to get the barytrine generator set up and ticking?"

"Call it a couple of weeks. I'll have to go back to Marandis for the generator. It may take me a day or two to get it, you know. We'll have to get our license revised, and we'll have to put up a bond against the safety of this planet—Earth, as they call it. Of course, we'll have lots of time to look for another sun where we can put their planet. We can do that after the beacon is started and they're out of danger-distance."

Bren Fallow said, "So the first thing for you to do is to get your barytrine generator. You go ahead, Scyth. Chat and I have this program fairly well on its way."

Chat added, "When you take off from here, be sure

you go due North until you're a long way out of line. No use in advertising our position to the others."

"Right. I'll fog-off the course as best I can."

So within a few minutes after his return to Mercury, Scyth Radnor was on his way back to Marandis to make the final arrangements. He took the long way out of this part of the galaxy, and wound his way in an inextricable pattern to confuse any possible competition. Until the through-route was surveyed, and the first passage made from end to end, there would be no exclusive franchise. Another company might be able to latch onto one open lane on this route—an open lane not yet covered—and force their company to part with some of its rights.

The fact that Scyth Radnor took along the menslator that had put him on the mental trail of Dusty Britton wasn't considered important. Neither of the other two would have done anything with it, now that their problem was settled.

CHAPTER VII

From the teletypes of Worldwide Press Service:

"UNITED STATES COAST GUARD RADIO TODAY REPORTED A DISTRESS SIGNAL FROM SCHOONER BUCCANEER OFF COAST OF BAJA CALIFORNIA STOP BUCCANEER ATTACKED BY QUOTE ALIEN SPACECRAFT ENDQUOTE STOP USE WITH DISCRETION COMMA BUCCANEER OWNED BY DUSTY BRITTON OF MARTIN GRAMER STUDIOS STOP"

An excerpt from the daily column of Garry Granger:

"There is something in the wind that smells like a publicity stunt. Dusty Britton, our Space Patrol type Sir Galahad, supposedly took off for the Venus jaunt some three weeks ago, but has succeeded in sending a distress signal from off the coast of Southern California somewhere. Apparently The Space Patrol is about to meet up with Moby Dick, or possibly it will be Ten Thousand Leagues Under The Sea With Dusty Britton. We would like to know two things: One is whether our intrepid hero actually risked his million dollar neck in a rocket, and the second thing is how much hanky-panky the Coast Guard is going to stand for. Some things should be kept sacred. We are not very religious here at the office; but we do believe in the Brotherhood of Man, and somehow we resent bitterly the use of distress signals as a means of getting publicity."

Part of a press release from Martin Gramer Production, Inc.:

"Now it can be admitted! Dusty Britton has combined fact with fantasy! No longer a mere actor, Dusty Britton was called from the space rocket just a few minutes before take-off time to investigate a secret report of space operations off the coast of Baja California. If Dusty Britton reported an attack, it stands to reason that the secrecy that surrounded the original report is no longer necessary and Dusty Britton's presence on earth instead of in the space rocket can be disclosed. We await more detailed information as to the real nature of . . ."

From a press-conference held at Arlington, Virginia, resulting in large black headlines:

SIGNAL FALSE! SAYS F.C.C.!

"Radar Stations report that no sign of space opera-

tions by any agency other than the Venus Rocket has been observed. Even the early warning screen operating along the coast of California and Lower California has nothing to report. The signal of distress is obviously false, and Dusty Britton will probably be asked to show just cause for emitting such a report and/or to prove that he is innocent."

Statement from the United States Coast Guard:

"Search and rescue squadrons of the Coast Guard were in flight above the schooner *Buccaneer* within an hour after the interrupted distress signal from Dusty Britton. The schooner appeared to be in excellent condition and was making its way back toward land when sighted. Radio challenges were ignored but upon flying low, Dusty Britton and an unknown woman were seen waving from the deck. There seemed to be no signs of distress, but a Coast Guard Cutter is speeding to the ship and is expected to make contact in the next few hours."

Exerpt from the column of Garry Granger:

"What actor, long noted for his derring-do and his exemplary behaviour has been in unchaperoned company with a nubile young female in romantic surroundings? In our youth, heroes were only permitted to kiss their horses. We applaud the approach to Reality, but then we are no longer a youth."

From the *Wall Street Journal*:

"D'B'tt'n Ent'pses Open 68 Close 43 Off 25"

Editorial from the *Journal of Temperance*:

"Elsewhere on these pages is an apology for not printing the interview between our science reporter,

Miss Agatha Westlake and Mr. Dusty Britton. The interview was not concluded, because Miss Westlake believed that she could detect the Breath of Alcohol on Mr. Britton. It is deplorable that the Youth of this Fair Land have put their Faith and their Future Ideals into the character of a man of such Despicable hidden leanings. A package of Cigarettes was visible on the deck of Mr. Britton's boat, and nearby was a small glass of the kind only found in those Dens of Iniquity, the formal name of which is forbidden to these pages.

"Let us therefore seek a new Champion, who will eschew these Vices; who will find it more seemly to extend his Gracious Invitation of vacationtime to his Youthful Admirers instead of a Woman of Low Moral Fiber. We feel . . ."

Time Magazine, Science Section:

"Dr. Willy Ley, in an interview today in his retirement home in Jackson Heights, pointed out that he had, for sixty years, been convinced that the limiting value of the speed of light was a false theory. Therefore Dr. Ley concluded that it was entirely possible that an extra-solar race could have developed interstellar travel.

"My Grandson, Gregory, is aboard the Venus Rocket," said Dr. Ley in the rich German accent that seventy-five years in New York have not diluted. "I hope to see the day he takes off for Alpha Centauri."

"But I do feel that there is reason to doubt the theory offered by Mr. Dusty Britton. Certainly the more intelligent persons of any galactic civilization would be less likely to contact an actor instead of scientists or government officials? This theory of phanobands, barytrine fields, and menslators sounds too much like the fancies of science fiction. Such things may exist, but I doubt Mr. Britton's ability to concoct a plausible explanation.'"

Article in *The American Weekly*:

"With heat rays and weapons of unimaginable power, the enemies of the Earth will swoop down to . . ."

From the *Chicago Tribune*:

"Not since the days of King George III has the threat of foreign entanglements been so great . . ."

From the *Daily Worker*:

"Without a doubt this advanced culture has developed a perfect galactic State, capable of serving all men according to their needs. We feel that a pardonable mistake has been made by their representatives in contacting a man of Dusty Britton's self-centered attitude, and we will wait with open arms the return of the galactic emissaries, who will bring with them the glories of . . ."

From Mount Palomar:

"Variable stars are of natural origin and can neither be started nor stopped. The theory that such stars are used by a galactic civilization as beacons and celestial stop-lights is utterly fantastic."

From the teletypes of Worldwide Press:

"Dusty Britton was arraigned today in federal court for having violated the rulings of the federal communications commission and the international rulings of the Havana Conference of 1972. An indictment is expected from the Grand Jury, still in conference.

"Britton is charged with having caused the transmission of a false distress signal. He pleaded not guilty at his arraignment and will probably plead not

guilty if his case comes to trial. A fine of ten thousand dollars or three years in jail (or both) is the maximum penalty for a conviction. Public sentiment will probably make the maximum sentence mandatory; this is an election year and the Administration is interested in demonstrating that its foremost desire is to serve the Public Interest."

Press Release from Cosmic Studios:

"The filming of first run of the new series, *Jack Vandal, Space Rover* was completed here after an extensive eighteen day program. Jack Vandal is patterned after the characters of The Saint and The Lone Ranger. Unrestricted by the laws that prevent a policeman from performing his moral duty, hated by the Underworld, Jack Vandal is to become a Robin Hood of Space. The World Premiere will take place at The Palace Theatre, in Greater New York."

Statement from The Office of Scientific Research & Development:

"No evidence has ever been detected that tends to corroborate Dusty Britton's statements to the effect that radiation phenomena exist which cannot be explained by the application of Maxwell's Equations, and which are not subject to the limitations imposed by the theory of general relativity. Before any research can be initiated to investigate such a fanciful theory, this office insists that some laboratory demonstration of the effect take place."

Ruling by the Bureau of Navigation, Marandanian Sector:

"It is hereby granted that a barytrine field be established about the Planet Three of Sol, and the

Planet Three then shall be transported and placed *in situ* near a star of appropriate dimensions. This enactment is to take place at the convenience of the Transgalactic Company, with the proviso that no inconvenience take place to the culture of Planet Three. It is ruled herewith that the change in stellar hemispheres and the revision in planetary pattern is of no prime importance to a primitive culture.

"It is further ruled that the loss of approximately one thousand years of direct time in the inhabitant's life is of no importance since contact with the external culture has not taken place, and therefore this loss has no bearing on the primitive culture. At the end of this period of transmittal, investigatory contact will be made to formulate a program of enlightenment which will result in the eventual assimilation of Sol Three into the Grand Galactic Government.

Signed, Sealed, and Delivered
BuNav, by Direction.

CHAPTER VIII

Barbara Crandall opened the door for a quick glance, then opened it wide. "Oh. It's you!"

Dusty nodded glumly. "Yeah. Surprised?"

Barbara shrugged. "A bit. When did they let you out?"

"This morning."

"Rough?"

"You said it. Was it rough on you?"

"A little, but it's been made up for."

"How come?" asked Dusty looking up.

She smiled quietly. "I've got legs and a figure. I've been cheesecaked all over town as the *Star Girl*, and

there's talk of my getting a part in the Jack Vandal series over at Cosmic Studios."

"How so? Seems to me that we're both sort of washed up."

Barbara shook her head. "Jack Vandal is a sort of cheerful villain, you know. He takes delight in bumping off the well-protected crook who can't be touched by the law. He's hunted by the police and hated by the underworld . . ."

"Spare the details. They haven't changed in a couple of thousand years. How come you're not in the dog house?"

Barbara smiled. "Because the woman in that kind of opus is always a sort of shady lady herself. It wouldn't do to have an innocent damosel for the companion of a buccaneer. It wouldn't ring true. So with my slightly tarnished reputation, I'm a natural. But that's enough about me, Dusty. What happened to 'you'?"

"The lie detector test."

"Then didn't that sort of prove your point?"

"I thought it did, but I forgot one thing. It seems that the lie detector, no matter how good, is capable only of showing whether the character is telling a falsehood or not."

Barbara smiled confidently. "So you were telling the truth. Weren't you?"

"Sure," grunted Dusty. "Sure I was. But, quoting Pilate, 'What is Truth?' One of the court psychologists quoted that, and pointed it out very clearly. If I firmly believe that the Moon turned bright purple at ten o'clock last night, then under a lie detector I'd be credited with a 'Truth' when I said so. In fact, the thing would say that I was telling a lie if I believed that the moon was purple, and tried to cover up by saying that it hadn't changed. Follow?"

"So what was the verdict?"

"The verdict was to the effect that I was suffering under some hallucination—possibly alcoholically induced. Therefore my lie-detector acquittal was valid only to

prove that my call for help was, at the time, due to my personal conviction of danger. I was adjudged temporarily incompetent."

"What kind of sentence? They didn't just let you go."

"I've been two weeks in the questionable ward of the federal looney locker. You see, to prove me guilty, they had to show that I had willfully and maliciously transmitted a false signal, with intent to deceive and/or for some personal reason. Willful tampering of this nature comes out as malicious mischief, malicious tampering becomes a federal offence. Maybe I've got my terms mixed up, but I think you get the idea.

"The end-up was this: Since, for reasons obvious, Dusty Britton was convinced of his personal danger, his emission of a distress signal cannot be called malicious. Since I am no longer the top star I was once—in fact, Gramer has cancelled my contract on the moral turpitude clause, and the McDougall Office has blackballed me from all productions—no one could show that I was doing this for publicity purposes. Especially since we are not making—were not, I should have said—any opus about extrasolar travel. So after a couple of weeks of observation at the spinbin, they let me free with an admonition to leave the stuff alone. Barb, have you got a drink?"

"Sure thing. Look, Dusty, I know what you must think, but please don't ask me to corroborate your story. Not again."

Britton nodded soberly. "I won't. The first time, I thought we could convince 'em. But not any more, kid. One of us in the mud is enough. We've got to find a new attack."

She handed Dusty a highball which he sipped with gratification before he said, "Barbara, we've got to do something."

"Why?"

He looked at her, stunned. "Why?"

Barbara took a sip of her own highball. "We won't lose a thing, and you know it," she said quietly.

"A thousand years . . ."

"So what? Supposing that they were a bit more accurate than Scyth predicted. Suppose that they took this thousand years out of our life at a time when you weren't looking at the sun. Do you realize—" Barbara's voice lowered a bit dramatically, "—or have you been watching the night sky to see whether they have already?"

"I have," he admitted.

"All right. Then you surely must realize that this thousand years out of your life isn't going to change the stock market an inch. Or anything else."

Dusty nodded. "This I can realize. But do you think I like losing everything but my other shirt? Do you realize that, as of this moment, I've got only a couple of thousand bucks tucked away and about as much prospect of landing another job as a dead fly?"

"You're not really worried, are you, Dusty?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because as soon as this barytrine field goes on and off, and we find ourselves around another sun, in another sky, you'll be corroborated."

He looked at her. "Of course—and I've kept my big trap shut, too."

"You've what?"

"You don't think I'd be nuts enough to go around telling people 'Well, if you don't believe me, just wait until next month!' do you?"

"Why not?"

"Because then they'd have carefully kept me on ice until after the big event."

"After which your story would be corroborated, and you'd—"

"I'd have nothing," said Dusty sharply. "It isn't good enough. Sure, I'd be corroborated, but then I'd be blamed for not being effectual enough to convince people in the first place. I'd be blamed for not being the guy I've been depicting on the stage. I've been Dusty Britton, the Great Hero. But when it comes down to really doing

something, I'm Dusty Britton, the phoney. Instead of going a-space I went dallying with a dame."

"I don't see . . ."

Dusty drained his glass and held it out for a refill. "First it is Dusty Britton, Liar First Class. Next it is going to be Dusty Britton, Helpless Incompetent. Men have made mistakes, Barb. A lot of men have been disbelieved now and again, but they've fought it and finally proved the truth. But in order for me not to go on losing all the way, I've got to fight it. I can't just fold my hands and tell 'em that they can wait and see, and then yelp 'I told you so!' If there's anything that people hate, it is 'I told you so!' characters."

Barbara Crandall looked at him pityingly. "Dusty, just what do you hope to accomplish?"

"I hope I'll be able to . . ."

"No. I know what you want to do. But what I want to know is 'How?'"

"There must be some way . . ." His voice trailed off.

"I can't see it. Scyth Radnor has probably gone to Marandis to get his license revised, or whatever, and to pick up the barytrine generator. Dusty, do you know where Marandis is?"

"Somewhere towards the galactic center."

"I'm told that the galaxy is a big place. You've about as much chance of getting there as you have of swimming the Pacific Ocean with one arm tied behind you. Scyth is gone from here so far that it takes light thousands of years to get that far. Hell, Dusty, face the fact: You can't even get off the Earth, and those who can don't get off very far. At this moment, the best resources of all the science of the Earth, and the so-called planetary income, couldn't move a housebrick from here to Venus in less than a matter of months.

"Alpha Centauri is actually no more than a dreamer's symbol, so far as we're concerned. In fact, you and I know that Scyth's little friends are somewhere on the Mercury darkside getting ready to make Sol a variable. We couldn't get *there* for months and months, and then we'd

have a hell of a time locating them, even if we had whatever it might take to spend that time in search."

Barbara thought for a minute and then went on: "And if we could direct the entire Earth, and could call upon anything or anyone, we wouldn't know where to start. What is a phanoband? Why is a barytrine field? There are a couple of dozen rather brilliant men who believe that the speed of light is not a limiting velocity, but this is only a conviction, not founded by any experimental evidence to the contrary. So maybe you've got a firm inner drive to go out and prove yourself. But how are you going to make headway against a race that considers us primitive?"

"We've got to make contact."

"How? Shall we call Mercury darkside on the phanoband communicators? And what was that intermediary step? The machinus fields?"

Something about abandoning general relativity for the machinus theory of space-time."

"Got any theories?" asked Barbara pointedly. "Frankly, Dusty, I'd like to help, but I feel too much like a man, trying to come all the way from the stone age to the atom bomb in ten days, without help. In order to circumvent their foul plan we've got to abandon a very workable theory in favor of an unknown something called the machinus theory of space-time. From that, we develop something called phanoband radiation, which produces factors enabling us to reduce the theory to practise and eventually we take to deep space, find Marandis, and put our case in front of some sort of bureaucratic something-or-other. Can't see it, Dusty."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Sit and take it. What else can you do? Darn it, Dusty, you can't lick 'em and you aren't in any position to join 'em. We haven't got the initiation fee, we don't have the address, and we hardly talk the language."

Dusty looked at her sourly. "I'd hoped you'd help," he said unhappily. "You at least know what the score is."

"Dusty, I'd like to help. I do know what the score is. You're trapped in an awkward position. And like a lot of other people, you are in a position where you can't do a thing about it. So you might as well save your high blood pressure and start looking around to see what you can make out of it."

Dusty finished his drink and left. In a trash-can by the alley was a Dusty Britton Blaster, complete with holster and a tin medal for sharpshooting. The school-store across the street was displaying a Jack Vandal mask and a small case. The case held ten candy cigarettes and a secret compartment suitable for concealing ten-thousand dollar bills, lifted from lawless characters who might have used the dough to bribe juries or buy professional gunmen.

He made his way along the street unrecognized.

CHAPTER IX

The guard at the front gate looked at Dusty with suspicion. Britton looked back defiantly. For a number of years, the guard had practically bowed thrice as Dusty Britton approached. Dusty hoped that the habit of deference was well established.

"Have you a pass, Mr. Britton?"

"Now see here, Sam, I don't need a pass and—"

"Mr. Britton, I've got orders to—"

"Look, Sam. Let's not stall. I want in and I'm going to—"

"One minute, Mr. Britton. I'll have to call."

Dusty grunted. "I want to see Doctor Ross."

"Oh. Well, just a minute."

The guard called, and Dusty could hear the roar of Martin Gramer: "Throw the bum out!"

"Sorry, Mr. Britton. We can't let you in."

"Look, Sam. I've got trouble. You've got trouble. Do you remember your younger days, Sam, when you were the top boy at Graphic Arts?"

"Sure do. Great days, too."

"What happened, Sam?"

The smile faded from Sam's face. "I got too old."

Dusty nodded sympathetically. "You got too old for the young romantic part you used to play, and nobody would look at you afterwards. All you really needed was a chance to go in and see one of them. You could have convinced them. You might have been able to slide quietly from the young romantic to the poised adult; the businessman; the mature, self-confident character. But no one would talk to you. Remember?"

"I know. But—"

"Sam, all I want is to gab with Dr. Ross for a minute or two. I've a great idea. And I'll make you a promise, Sam."

"Promise?"

"Sure. I'll promise you that if you let me in right now, and this idea of mine goes through, that I'll see that you get a good bit in anything I'm in. We'll work it up from character actor until you're playing bigger and bigger bits. You can make a comeback, Sam, and I'll help you then if you help me now. How's about it?"

Sam looked through the studio gates for a moment, and the thinking could almost be seen in operation. He had little to lose; he could always blame Dusty's entrance on some flanged-up excuse. And if Dusty's idea paid off, he (Sam) might be able to take credit for having used some initiative in recognizing its worth.

"It's a deal, Mr. Britton. But don't forget me."

"I won't."

Dusty went inside, found the main idea-office, and talked himself into the office of Dr. Ross. These hurdles were less difficult than the front gate. Once a man was inside the fence, that very fact gave him a certain position far above someone denied the initial entrance.

Doctor Harold Ross greeted him with surprise. "Dusty! How goes it?"

"Not good. I'm a professional louse, Doc."

"How come?"

"Don't you read? Forget it. Look, Doc, you're actually the only scientist I know, so I want to ask a couple of questions."

"Please, Dusty, don't ask me my opinion . . ."

"I won't. I want to ask you to forget what's been said and consider the whole thing from a completely unsupported standpoint."

"I'll try. But let's not lose sight of the fact that I'm not a credited scientist, as you put it. I'm a sort of cockeyed physicist whose job is to see that actors squinting through telescopes see Saturn at the right angle, and that people looking through spectroscopes don't point at a blue triplet and call it the Sodium D Lines."

"You might be even better than a real physicist of the research kind."

"Thanks for the kind words, Dusty. Flattery will get you nowhere."

"I'm not trying flattery. You've been in this make-believe business for a long time. You might be able to think it out."

"Go on, man. Spill your idea. What do you want me to do?"

"Let's assume that Dusty Britton's wild tale about a man named Scyth Radnor, from Marandis, is right. And that this guy came out of a spacecraft parked in the ocean, sitting on the sill of the spacelock waiting for me. He talked about the death of the general relativity theory in favor of something called the machinus theory of space-time, phanobands, menslators, and all sorts of things."

"Yeah? We've been having space warps ever since the days of Jack Williamson."

Dusty grinned, perhaps for the first time in weeks. "Look, I know the patter well enough. Dr. Edward E. Smith invented the Bergenholm, Murray Leinster came along with the superdrive and another Smith developed

the matter transmitter to a fare-thee-well, but all that is so much birdfood."

"What are you getting at, Dusty?"

"I wish I had studied a bit more science," said Dusty plaintively. "I don't know a microfarad from a polysyllabic neutron. But I'm telling you that my so-called strange fancy is the God's Truth. Sometime in the next two weeks, the Earth is going to get itself transplanted. You can either help me now, or you can come back later and tell me that you're damned sorry you tossed me out. Take it or leave it."

"All right. So maybe I'll take it. I've only a couple of weeks to lose. What do you want me to say?"

"Look, Doc, supposing that you were convinced that interstellar travel is possible, that these phanobands do exist. That this menslator is a commercial instrument. And so on.

"Take the first premise: Faster-than-light travel is a commercial fact due to the development of a theory called the machinus theory of space-time. Can you do a bit of hypothetical theorization?"

"Sure thing. I don't mind. We'll take this on the basis of plenic syllogistics. Our first premise will be that this menslator works as your pal Scyth Radnor claims."

"It's Scyth, not scythe."

"Then as I put it, the menslator produces the mental image that Scyth intends. He will say, for instance: 'The gostak distims the doshes.' and because he means that a professional preparer of comestibles has placed an unstated umber of crustaceans under an open flame, you receive this statement of Scyth as: 'The cook broiled some lobsters.' Is this clear?"

"I can follow you," said Britton. "This much Scyth explained."

"Good. Now let's look at our commonly accepted definition of 'Mechanus.' This means that it works. In other words we have him telling us that their culture has developed a 'workable theory of space-time' which has been taken up after the theory of general relativity dis-

played a number of gaping holes. So their 'mechanus theory of space-time' is a workable theory."

"And where does this lead us?"

"Right back into a circle," said Dr. Ross thoughtfully. "Because if they've developed interstellar travel due to considerations brought about by the mechanus theory, that means that they have proved their theory by practice."

Dusty grunted half-humorously. "Isn't this like saying that Mud is sticky because it's gooey? Or that Winter is cold due to a lack of heat?"

Ross nodded. "Or that things fall because of the law of gravity."

"But aren't all these things a case of defining 'A' in terms of 'A'?"

"What isn't?" demanded Dr. Ross. "You're not in search of the Universal Truth, are you?"

"No, but . . ."

"Look, Dusty, the reason that we can afford to accept the fact that one and one adds up to two is simply due to the fact that one and one *does* add up to two in a great majority of cases."

"Wait a minute, Doc. One and one is always two."

"Not when you add a quart of alcohol to a quart of water. One and one here adds up to about one point eight."

Dusty waved a hand. "That's different."

"Not by a long shot, Dusty. There are extenuating circumstances. But this is just a proof of the fact that one and one is not always two."

"All right. But where does this leave us?"

"In the same circle. Granting that your observations are correct, proper, and unwarped by the addition of bourbon, Scyth Radnor and his galactic civilization have developed faster-than-light travel, which has resulted in the establishment of a galactic government. But the explanation of how it is done cannot be derived from the nomenclature of the theory. Frankly, I have not the faintest idea of how to go about unravelling the word

'Phanoband' unless we take it apart from its roots. Let's see, now."

The physicist thought for a long time and then looked at Britton apologetically.

"I may be off the beam, Dusty, but I have a notion that your own mind put it together this way: 'Phano'—which seems to be the first particle of the concept is actually a dual. 'Phan' probably pertains to the roots of phantom, or unreal, or ghostly, or what is commonly referred to as the 'supernatural.' The so-called supernatural is invariably a phenomenon which cannot be explained by commonly accepted academic theory, or empirical practise. That's mostly because the people who work with it have neither academic nor empirical data. Incidentally, the 'o' part of this first phrase is undoubtedly a conjunctive vowel stuffed into the word so that it can be uttered without losing a couple of front teeth, or blowing a vocal fuse, or maybe spraying the listener like a professional German lecturer. So let's accept the concept of 'Phan' as something that you cannot explain in common terms."

"Go on, Doc. You're reducing my case to an absurdity, you know."

"I'm sorry, Dusty, but that's how I see it. Now, let's take the 'band' part of the word. As a disciple of Maxwell, et al, I am hopelessly incapable of concocting a workable theory of radiation which has nothing to do with some basic concept of frequency. Frequency, when you sit down and start analyzing it, is a nice, stable idea that explains a hell of lot, Dusty. As you get into atomics, you find that particle radiation can be mathematically reduced to terms of frequency. You can actually compute the equivalent frequency of a thrown baseball, or a .22 rifle bullet, you know. Then we get to that high-flung miracle we call 'resonance' and God protect me from having to deliver a thirty-minute explanation of resonance."

"I won't ask you, Doc. But aren't you getting involved in your own traps?"

"Yes, I am. And I'm sorry. But I can't help it. Well . . . you can follow my fumbblings, Dusty. In the first place, the radiation is not understood—which explains your accepting the mental concept as 'Phano.' And because the physics of the radiation must be other than electromagnetic—which would call for the menslation into 'spectrum' the somewhat ambiguous term 'band' is assigned in your mental concept of the idea. So the literal menslation of the word is: 'Unknown mode of radiation,' which—"

"But where are we getting, Doc?"

"That's what I was approaching, Dusty. All this harangue boils down to is the following: These people have a form or type of energy level which is completely inexplicable to terrestrial science at the present state of the art. Their terms, when menslated into our level of appreciation, come out as 'something that works' and 'something that cannot be defined' which, after all, is like trying to explain to a savage why a hunk of black rock always turns toward one direction."

"Hell!"

"Sure, it's hell. Even your own term 'menslator', which I've picked up as a fine concept, is only your own feeble transliteration of the definition. It does not carry any of the basic theory. This fantastic gizmo merely aids in the conveying of an idea from one mind to another, despite the fact that the two minds place different values upon the definition of words."

"But this isn't what I'm getting at, Doc. What I want to know is: Granting the possibility of faster-than-light velocities, what have we got to explain it?"

"Nothing. Nothing but your own statements that you believe that this is possible, and that someone has done it. None of us have any evidence that it is possible, except you. And I am afraid that I must question your training as a scientific observer."

"But Doc, I . . ."

"Let's face it, Dusty. You swing about as much weight in scientific circles as Suzy Richtmeyer, voted last year

as Miss Alphonse. She sat on the Caltech boohucky showing about three yards of shapely nylon and thirty-two well-polished teeth. She was gorgeous but ill-educated, Dusty. And if you sit there and ask me how anybody could possibly make any sound and workable theory out of what you describe, I can't see it."

"Look, Doc, maybe I can't deliver much. But they were there and that's what the guy told me."

"There's only one hope, Dusty."

Dusty Britton looked at Dr. Ross. "Doc, if there's any hope, let me know how."

"You've claimed that this galactic gang have some humanitarian instincts. They aren't just going to set fire to good old Sol and let us alternately fry and freeze."

"Stop kidding me."

"Maybe I'm not kidding. I'm still promulgating on your own cockeyed plenum."

"You're not giving me much—"

Dr. Ross sat back confidently. "No, I can't say that I give much credit to your story, Dusty."

"Now see here—"

"Now *you* see here," snapped the physicist sternly. "I won't deny that anything is possible. But I am a firm believer in the law of least reaction, and I think that this covers the case. If this character Scyth Radnor is at all concerned about our welfare—still granting that he does exist elsewhere but your own mind—then get this, Dusty Britton: He will be back to see how you've made out in your program of preparing people for the Change before he turns on this barytrine generator."

Dusty eyed Dr. Ross sourly. "And what is your explanation of that word?"

"Easy, and it means no more than anything else when it is what you call menslated. 'Bary' stems from the root 'heavy' as in 'barytone' referring to something of heavy voice or highly accented. 'Trine' refers to something three-fold in astronomical or—er—astrological (haruumpf) meaning."

"My God, Dusty, the word itself pertains to something

as three-times-as-heavy. You don't expect me—or any other scientist—to come up with something cogent, of a practical nature, from a bunch of halfbaked definitions, do you? All you've given me so far is a workable theory, an unknown medium of radiation, and something that is three-times-heavy. Tell you what, chum. Bring me your Scyth Radnor and introduce me. I know guys who would analyze MacBeth's three witches' brew if they could get a microgram sample. But not from that gobble-gabble about the 'fillet of a fenny snake, in the cauldron boil & bake!' line out of Shakespeare."

The physicist went on in an undertone: "Eye of frog and tongue of newt," until Dusty stood up and prepared to leave.

CHAPTER X

The sleek spacecraft slid down out of the dark sky and made tangential contact with the bubble of force that had been their home for so long. Bren Fallow and Chat Honger stood there waiting, until the spacelock opened against the inner air; they wanted a breath of atmosphere that had not come out of a can. Not that the air in the ship would be any fresher, really, but at least it did smell closer to the air of home. Scyth Radnor appeared almost as soon as the spacelock opened.

"Well?" asked Bren.

"Very well. We've got our revised license and I've got the barytrine generator."

"Good. So now all we have to do is to set it up and turn it on and get Planet Three out of the way of this star. Then we'll be about ten days getting the whole show on the road."

"How's the beacon setup?"

"Give us another three weeks and we'll have the sigma curve correlated and our resonances all set. No trouble, eh?"

"None at all. The hearing was in secret session, although I'll bet a year's pay that someone is out looking for this rift right now. You can't hold a hearing without someone catching on. Trans-stellar, I think, is safe. Transgalactic is almost certain to be running around like mad. Interstar transfer isn't looking for the rift actively, but they have a bunch of contacts working, you know. They'll bribe and pay, and get their lines working, after which Interstar will know where this body is buried. So we'd better move fast, friends."

Bren nodded at Radnor. "How soon can you set up the barytrine?"

"I told you. Ten days."

"Good. Let's not waste any more time. Once this job is finished here, I think we can go on without being uncovered. They'll have a time finding the rest of this rift once we've started this beacon and go on to the next. Too bad you bothered to stop here—"

Honger waved a hand. "Wrong, Bren. He had to stop and let us know. You wouldn't have him cluttering up the phanobands with a lot of directional talk, would you?"

"That isn't what I meant. It's just too bad that we don't have something that can't be pinpointed."

Scyth grunted. "It's only a few minutes from here to Planet Three."

Chat nodded. "Going to look up our pal?"

"Dusty Britton? No. Not necessary."

"I should think that you'd find it a good idea. After all, how do we know how they're taking it?"

Scyth chuckled. "I know what you are thinking, Chat. I'm one ahead of you."

Chat laughed. "This I want to hear. The day that Scyth is one ahead of me . . ."

"I'll merely outline the facts. Face 'em, Chat. In any culture so primitive that they use radiomagnetism and

chemical rockets, any man with guts and gumption enough to be a loved and lauded leader of a Space Patrol would be able to command the ears of the entire globe at a single gesture. Premise two, our reasons for warning them are simple: We only want them to be prepared and to understand what's happening when their sky winks into another pattern, and they discover that they've lost their moon. Right?"

"Right."

"Then let's suppose the worst. Dusty Britton has been discredited for divers reasons. Maybe The Space Patrol takes a dim view of their top man dallying with a female. Maybe their scientists are mentally musclebound enough to deride any man who comes up with a theory that defies their so-called fact. For any number of reasons, Dusty Britton may be out."

"Ah—hah!"

"Yup. But why?" chuckled Scyth. "Out because he tried to tell 'em all about it. So, in either case, they know the truth. No matter what Dusty is now, or where he is now, the world will have been told. He may be in disgrace, but as soon as the world sees the effect, they'll re-credit him and believe. No hysteria and no harm done. So we've accomplished our mission there and so what? Why should I go comb that backward planet looking him up?"

Bren Fallow chuckled. "Chat, today Scyth is at least one day ahead of you. Shall I enter it in the log?"

Chat nodded humorously. "Sure, put down: 'Today Scyth developed a plausible ideal' and use the exclamation point."

Scyth's reply was an invitation to visit the theological place of eternal punishment.

Dusty Britton was sitting at his desk trying to figure out an angle when the bell rang. He opened it upon three gentlemen in rather sombre business suits.

"Mr. Britton? We are delegates from the local chapter

of The Human Brotherhood Society. Can you give us a minute of your time?"

Dusty eyed them suspiciously. The Human Brotherhood was a completely screwball outfit so far as Dusty was concerned. In this opinion Dusty concurred with—well, it is easier to state that the favorable view was held by so small a percentage of the population that figures are not important.

Dusty was about to slam the door in their faces when one of them said, "We know that the Grand Galaxy is peopled with a Brotherhood. It must be so."

Dusty nodded, trying to think.

The foremost put his toe in the door and said, "We believe you, Dusty Britton. We look upon you as a purveyor of Truth. We have come to ask you to lead us lesser mortals into the Light."

Dusty stopped trying to think and started to retreat in sensible disorder. "I don't think I can help you."

"But we are here to help *you*. In the Name of Brotherhood, we implore you to show us the way to the Capital of the Universe. This Marandis of which you spoke."

"It's up there somewhere." Dusty pointed toward the ceiling.

"We know. And you must show us the way."

"Look, I've got—"

"We have made up a purse. One thousand dollars. You must accept it, buy a spacecraft, go to Marandis, and tell them—"

Dusty's laugh was bitter. "Go away!" he roared. "Get out of my sight! A thousand bucks wouldn't buy enough juice to drive the fuel pumps that feed the motors from the main tanks. Go away!"

"But Brotherhood—"

"Get your toe out of my door before I pinch it off!"

"He has rejected us."

"He is an unbeliever."

"He is selfish. He lies dormant when he could go and do something about it if he could only profit."

Dusty pushed the foremost "Brother" back by employ-

ing the flat of the hand to the flat of the face and exerting pressure. The "Brother" made a billiard carom from brother to brother as Dusty swung the door with vigor. The loud slam came as a well-placed period to his thought:

No wonder Scyth called us primitivel

CHAPTER XI

Scyth Radnor chuckled to himself. He was very pleased with himself for a large number of reasons, mostly his brilliance. He surveyed himself in the mirror for the last time, chuckled again, and then went below in the big star ship to check the barytrine generator that was starting to build up its field to the proper proportions. It was running well, and it would not be long before he could start the second operation, which was the synchronization of its forcefield fabric with the force-field fabric of this particular section of Space.

Then Scyth left the ship on the errand that pleased him so much.

Eventually, with no adventure worth reporting, Radnor was standing in front of a door with one slender forefinger jabbing at the doorbell.

Barbara Crandall opened the door and blinked. "Yes?" Her normal reaction was to open the door about six inches until she determined the person making the call. But the sight of this man in faultless whites made her open the door a full two feet.

"Miss Crandall, I . . ."

"I don't think I . . ."

Scyth chuckled again. "Barbara, may I call you Barbara?"

"Oh, now see here . . ."

"You don't know me?" demanded Radnor with a hurt expression.

"Should I?"

Barbara was beginning to doubt this parley as a program of good sense. As a stage personality, even though far from a universal popularity, she was often confronted by characters who wanted something or wanted to sell something. She knew very well that a completely dull heart frequently beat lustily beneath an expensive exterior and that a clear, open, friendly face often went with a mind only fit for the company of scorpions.

He saw her doubt, and decided that he had played this guessing game long enough. "Barbara Crandall, I know you don't recognize me in these clothes and in this surrounding. Our last meeting was under a rather strange circumstance. I am Scyth Radnor, the Marandanian."

"Scyth Radnor!" she exclaimed. "I—yes, it is. I'm sorry, Scyth. I did not recognize you in human clothing."

"Please, don't say it that way. I am as human as you are."

"And you're here to prove it?"

Scyth blinked. "There is no suitable answer to that," he said. "Must I supply one?"

Barbara laughed. "Come in, Scyth. Let me offer you the hospitality of a drink."

"Pleased," he said, following her into the living room. She waved him into a chair and turned towards the kitchen.

When she came back with two highballs, Scyth was relaxed in the loveseat. Barbara noted it with inward amusement and handed him the drink without comment. Scyth sipped the drink first and then took a deep and appreciative drink.

"You do have something to offer," he said, not showing his disappointment that Barbara had seated herself in the chair.

"That," she said, "makes two items, doesn't it, Scyth?"

Scyth felt that he had lost the initiative; Barbara was obviously way ahead of him. He tried another tack: "I came to see how you are making out."

"I'm not doing too badly."

"Is the public aware of the impending event?"

"Aware but not believing. Dusty Britton has lost his shirt over this."

"He'll get it back," said Scyth. "I'm not concerned over the result. It's happened before and it will probably happen again."

"It's more than possible that Dusty will be vindicated, but will then be blamed for not doing something about it."

"That cannot be helped. Britton *couldn't* do anything about it, you know. And if Dusty loses out in the long run, we can't permit the well-being of one lonely man to stand in the way."

Barbara smiled confidently, but with a slight twist to her pretty lips; it gave Scyth to think that there was some derision in her mind.

"Scyth, since you are going on with your program no matter what happens, and your concern about warning the people has worked no matter what happens to Dusty Britton, why do you bother coming back for a look-see?"

Radnor squirmed uncomfortably. No matter how he tried, Barbara Crandall was turning the trend of conversation right back onto the old original trail.

"You're an actress," he said.

"So I'm told."

Scyth smiled. "You're popular? You are in demand here?"

"I am on my way up."

"Barbara, you could be a popular actress, you know."

"Some day, I shall be. But this does not come overnight, Scyth. It takes work, you know."

"I have an idea that the flavor of the foreign often helps."

"This is true."

"Then I have a suggestion. Why not come along with us back to Marandis? You have youth and beauty, ability, and also the exotic flavor. It . . ."

"What shall I be?" she returned quietly. "The ignorant but beautiful barbarian? A clothes horse slightly incapable of holding an intelligent conversation? This seldom

works, Scyth. I've studied history a bit and I recall the case of a native girl called Pocahontas who was carried from her native surrounding into the height of civilization for the time. She was no actress—she was *exhibited* like a pet monkey or a rare zoölogical specimen. She died of what they called heartbreak. I think 'heartbreak' in this case was a combination of loneliness, of facing the realization that she could never really belong to the culture, of the futility of asking to be returned to her people. In other words Pocahontas lost the will to live. So, thank you, Scyth, but I have no desire to be a chattel, or a curiosity, or a museum-piece."

Scyth nodded seriously. "I see your point. But I don't agree with you. In the first place you are indulging in a conversation with me. In the second place, you . . ."

"In the first place," said Barbara pointedly, "this conversation is being carefully kept on my level, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Of course not. But look, Scyth, aren't you using that menslator of yours?"

"Of course."

"Then the menslator keeps the conversation down to my level, because by its very nature it cannot convey an idea to me that is beyond my understanding. Am I correct?"

"In a sense, yes. But . . ."

"Scyth, can you menslate a dog, for instance?"

"A dog has so little mind that . . ."

Barbara interrupted this with a wave of her hand. "So how long would it be before you and your people became damned sick and tired of talking down? It would be like trying to conduct an adult discussion in baby talk, wouldn't it?"

Scyth shook his head. "Not entirely. It might *be* that way at first, but this would not last. I don't know of your history, but I assume that your Pocahontas was a true savage. You had nothing like the menslator. Doubtless she never learned any real language, and so lacked the

ability to use a language of any kind—let alone learn the ramifications of the culture behind it.

"You would be on an entirely different plane. You have a language and a culture and you are quick to grasp a new idea. With a menslator, you would learn the language well enough in a short time. And while the deeper factors of the culture would always escape you, the superficial parts would eventually come easy."

For an answer, Barbara pointed to the wall. "Scyth, on that wall is a painting given to me by a character who calls himself an artist. Take a gander."

Scyth looked. The painting was a mess of squiggles and blots of color. It was iridescent here, and drab there, soft lines elsewhere and sharp contrasts somewhere else.

"Interesting. What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I *think* that this is the painting, but all it needs is a hole in one corner and it could be the palette that the guy used to make the painting."

"This is apropos of what?"

"Frankly, I think it is a mess. It is something that could be accomplished by a monkey turned loose in a paint store. But the artist calls it 'modern' and defends his stand by stating that anybody who criticises it is wayward, ignorant, and unappreciative of the finer moods and things of life. So put me in your culture and turn me loose. If I criticise, it will be because I am too primitive to understand these higher bits of culture. If I enjoy something, I am looked-down upon because I can't really feel the true depth of the thing. It . . ."

Scyth held up a hand and his empty glass at the same time. Barbara laughed and went to give him a refill. It also gave him time to think, and when she came back with his highball he had the answer.

"Barbara," he said sincerely, "a lot of what you say is true. But look at this: You will be a celebrity. You will, to all intents and purposes, be among your own kind. That helps. Perhaps you can't follow the deeper arguments, nor appreciate the complexities of society as we know them. But think of what you *can* see and enjoy—

which will be forever denied you if you refuse my offer."

"For instance?"

"Imagine the beauty of a planet under a double sun. Imagine, if you can, the beauty of a night sky with a ringed moon glowing soft over the landscape. Coalestis is a planet where most of the minerals and rocks combine into black stuff. At least, their building materials do. Imagine the beauty of a city of polished ebony.

"There is the twinworld we call Venago One and Two. The Venagos are separated only by about a hundred thousand miles and in the night sky you can look up and see the other world glowing over a quarter of the heaven. On the darkside are the winking beauties of the cities glowing like jewels. You will see worlds where the vegetation grows lush, riotous colors to hundreds of feet tall and there are cold planets where the ice and snow are always dazzling white. You will wear sheer shimmering cloth so soft that you have no word to describe it. You will wear jewels that glow with their own internal light. Money and luxury will be yours, to travel as you see fit; to spend the rest of your life flitting from star to star, seeing the varied wonders of the universe. That is the fate of an actress in our culture, Barbara, for Lord knows we have few enough of them."

Barbara looked at Radnor seriously. A number of things occurred to her, and one of them was simple: If Scyth had returned to earth to see her, it was obvious that she measured up well against the women of Marandis. Another factor was the yearning to travel. Barbara would not have recognized the train of thought if it had been labelled and explained, but it was there none the less. This was her one chance to see the greener grass on the other side of the galaxy. The chance to realize a human dream of countless centuries. (Perhaps galactic homesickness; Scyth had claimed all humankind as members of a single galactic race.)

She smiled wanly.

"You see what I mean?" asked Radnor.

"I think I do."

"Doubts?"

"Yes. I feel as though I'll be abandoning my own kind."

Scyth had been leaning forward on the loveseat. Now he came forward to cross the room. He leaned down, took her hands, and lifted her out of her chair. "You'll come?"

"You make it very attractive."

"You can do nothing by staying, Barbara."

"But . . ."

Scyth freed one hand and fished in his jacket pocket. He came up with a small box, flipping the cover up with his thumbnail deftly.

Coiled inside the box was a chain of tiny-linked metal that glowed gently with a pale green light. Against the dark cloth of the box lining was a scroll-work of dark metal, the setting for a stone about a half inch in diameter. The stone itself was cut in many facets, each of which glowed in a dazzle of a different color. Scyth moved the box gently, and the facets changed color and sent flecks of polychrome dancing against the ceiling, the walls, the floor. Flecks of light caressed his face and sparkled into her eyes.

Barbara took a deep breath, then held it, completely entranced by the bauble for which she had no words to describe. It was sheer beauty, and she knew that anything that she said would be completely inadequate.

Scyth freed his other hand and took the pendant by the chain. Holding it by both ends, he held it up to her throat.

Barbara stood immobile as Scyth put his hands to the back of her neck and fastened the clasp. Then, gently, Scyth took her by the shoulders and turned her to face the mirror on the door. She turned under his hands as though she had no will of her own, to look into the mirror and gasp at the rich beauty of the gem.

"Beautiful," whispered Barbara in a throaty voice. She turned her shoulders gently this way and that, moved her head and throat, took a deep breath to raise her breasts. The dancing lights flowed and flirted across wall and ceiling and flesh like elfin stars, they glinted

into the mirror and back upon the face of the man who stood behind her. Barbara put her head aside and rubbed the side of her chin against the back of Scyth Radnor's hand that cupped her shoulder. Scyth drew her back gently until she laid her cheek against his, her eyes still fascinated by the brilliant jewel on a chain around her neck— $\frac{1}{2}$ " diam., faceted, each facet a "dazzle of a different color."

Scyth dropped his hands along her arms and then embraced her slender waist with his palms. He encountered no resistance. Barbara flowed sinuously back against him.

The girl flexed her spine against him sensuously as she felt the beginning of a sweet languor; there came a quick thrill when Barbara realized that this languidness was nature's way of preparing for her surrender. There came a clear, cold moment of truth: she was viewing her surrender as the final pinnacle of emotion, to be reached only after exploring every pathway of physical stimulation. Having recognized the facts, Barbara threw a blanket over her logical mind by lifting her arms up and back to encircle his head and to turn his face to meet his lips with hers. She felt his response rising and she thrilled to feel it. Scyth's hands moved forward, smooth palms sliding over silk-covered midriff with warm ease. One arm encircled her waist in a close embrace, the other hand crossed over and moved upward under the tightening breasts. Barbara's breath caught as her lips began to part under his. Scyth's other hand smoothed downward in a slant across her hip and Barbara moved her body to meet it.

Together they broke contact only long enough to rearrange in an wholly open-mouthed kiss.

Tall, dark, slender, tanned, beautiful.

At this point Scyth wears "—faultless whites."

Scene: her living room.

Slowly, Barbara turned in his arms until her body faced his. She wriggled slowly and sensuously against him until the fit of their bodies was perfect and then

she let herself float on a wave of pure physical pleasure. They stood locked together kissing and caressing wildly for minutes—until tall, blond and handsome Scyth realized that the shoulder strap of the menslator “—little case hanging at his belt—” was no help, and neither was the instrument itself in a case like this.

He released her and slipped out of the strap, dropping the menslator on the floor. Barbara’s knees sagged water-weak until Scyth scooped her up in a cradle carry across his arms. As he turned to scan the apartment, Barbara found his throat with her lips and Scyth’s hand that supported her knees found the warm flesh above her stocking.

Scyth Radnor carried her across the living room to the broad divan and tumbled onto it with Barbara in a roll. They squirmed and wriggled until they were face to face in a perfect physical fit of sheer comfort.

Scyth kissed her chin, her throat, the pulse at the base of her neck, and moved to the little hollow at her shoulder, and Barbara whispered in a throaty voice that they should arise from this divan, and go hand in hand into the bedroom, remove the encumbering clothing, and pile onto the beautyrest between cool springmaids to make a night of it. She punctuated her suggestion by pausing at each comma to nibble on his ear for emphasis.

Scyth replied that probably everything she said was true, but so long as the menslator was over here on the floor, she might as well be talking in North American English as far as he was concerned.

Then instead of proceeding in an orderly fashion to exploit the complete whole of each and every emotional plateau before moving on to the next, their lovemaking flared into an explosive heat, erupted in almost-violence, and burned itself out in a searing arch of ecstasy. It was spontaneous combustion.

CHAPTER XII

The snick of a key in the lock did not break through their preoccupation with one another, but the cynical voice of Dusty Britton came as the shock of a bucket of cold water.

"Very pleasant scene," he said sourly. "I hope I'm interrupting something."

Scyth and Barbara parted in a whirl.

Scyth felt a sinking sensation in his middle as he realized the utter futility of explaining anything to anybody. The facts were far too clear, an explanation would either be superfluous or just sheer prevarication. The only sensible course was a hasty retreat, but this was barred by Dusty Britton.

Barbara took the woman's course. "Don't you ever use the doorbell?"

"Snooky, I've used the telephone to find out whether I was going to be welcome—up to now. But not this time. I want a hunk of this guy's hide, and it isn't because of sheer, blind jealousy."

"I think I should explain," said Scyth uncertainly.

Britton laughed. "What sort of explanation do you think I'll accept?"

"But I . . ."

"Shut up!"

"Now see here, Dusty Britton. You can't come in here and . . ."

"I'm here," said Dusty. "And I was good enough until this gopher came along with his faraway places and—er—his fancy junk jewelry."

"Junk!"

Dusty eyed Radnor. "What did it set you back, and do you think it's worth it?"

Scyth grunted angrily. "It isn't exactly junk."

"*Touché*," grinned Dusty. "How do they look on Marandis? As if they took the midnight broom down from Salem? Or do you like 'em beautiful but dumb?"

"I'm not dumb!" cried Barbara.

"To his kind you are just plain untutored ignorant," said Dusty.

"You're no brilliant headlight yourself."

"No," agreed Dusty, "but I'm just barely smart enough to go looking for the tomcat by remembering where a tomcat goes. I don't know from beans about this barytrine business, but I guessed that you'd have to set it up on Earth somewhere, start it cooking, and maybe wet-nurse the thing until it began to boil. Since you'd probably be on Earth with some time to kill, the chances are that you'd sooner or later try to get in touch with the only humans you've ever met before. Preferably the one you liked the looks of best. Ergo I've been haunting the front door like the Private Eye."

Barbara coughed. "You took that right out of *The Space Patrol and the Overlords of Delgon*."

"So I have good writers."

"What do you intend to do?" asked Scyth Radnor, very nervously.

"Put a spoke in your wheel. You and your barytrine gizmos, and your phanoband doodad, made a bum out of me and I'm going to make a bum out of you."

Dusty turned to Barbara. "What was his offer, Snooky? Your name in Galactic lights on the Times Square of the Universe? That's a gaudy bauble you're wearing, but do you know whether it came from a Galactic Tiffany's or a gaudy planet called Woolworth's Unlimited?"

Dusty turned again to face the Marandian up and down, taking the other man's measure. "I've wanted to take you apart for months, it seems. Now . . ."

Scyth's hands flashed toward his jacket pocket. Barbara screamed. Dusty's hand dived into the opening between

the lower two buttons on his shirt and came out with a snub-nosed revolver. The thing in Radnor's hand was about the size of a fountain pen, and as it emerged from the inner pocket, Scyth was already fingering whatever trigger it had. A pale emanance leaped outward and started to cut downward like a scythe.

Then the pale glow was blotted out with a flare of light and the noise of a pistol shot.

Scyth Radnor whirled, flinging his weapon against the wall from an outstretched hand. The thing hit with a crunching sound as Scyth continued to turn around on rubbery legs, to sit heavily and flatly on the floor. He sat, stunned, sidewise away from Dusty for just long enough to fold his arms. He nursed a shattered hand to his belly, moaned, and then folded forward over it. He fell sidewise, as if falling out of his own lap. He half-rolled and lay asprawl, his bleeding hand staining the carpet. Another flood of blood spread out on the white rug from his side.

Dusty Britton looked down at Scyth. He looked from Radnor to the snub-nosed gun in his hand and swallowed heavily. The gun dropped to the floor with a muffled thud. Dusty looked at Barbara from far-away eyes and said, "He . . . er . . . I . . ."

Then he slid down to the floor in a dead faint.

Barbara, white-faced, stifled a scream. The whole thing had been lightning fast, but somehow her shocked mind had caught most of it. And unless her mind had been wrong, Dusty had shot first. The little fountain-pen weapon had cut its swathe against empty air before it was shattered into bits against the far wall.

She felt dizzy; weak. She, too, wanted to slide to the floor and go to sleep, while someone else took care of the mess; but she knew that there was no one else to do it. She took a deep breath, and then drained the highball she found on the little bar. She augmented the diluted liquor with a very man-sized slug right from the neck of the bottle. The liquor burned faintly and it seemed to iron out her shaky nerves.

Barbara found the ice-pitcher, which was now filled with a mixture of half-melted cubes and the water resulting. Unceremoniously she poured the pitcher of ice-water over Dusty's face.

Dusty's eyes fluttered and his voice made spluttering noises. "Wha . . . Wha . . . ?"

"Come off it," Barbara commanded angrily.

Dusty sat up weakly. He looked around for a moment as if he weren't sure of where he was. Then he caught sight of Scyth Radnor, and it all came back to him. He scrambled to his feet and took the bottle from Barbara's hand. He took a healthy slug, then said, "He tried to . . . tried to . . . but I . . ."

Barbara laughed hysterically. Between gales of half-mad sounding laughter, she said, "Tried to beat the fastest man . . . in The Space Patrol . . . to the draw!"

Dusty slapped her across the face with the flat of his hand. "Shut up!" he roared. "Shut up and make sense!"

She came out of the hysteria instantly, shrinking back from Britton with a hand against the growing redness on her face. "Dusty—don't. . . ."

He shook his head hard. "Sorry. You needed . . ."

"I know. But he . . . ? Look, Dusty, what do we do now?"

Dusty looked down at the bleeding man. "Cops," he said thickly. "I've just shot a . . ." He could not finish; his face was turning green again.

"Cops nothing," snapped Barbara.

"But shooting . . ."

"Come off it, Dusty. The cops will only delay and investigate and generally louse things up, until it will be two months and a thousand years from here."

"Cops aren't that stupid."

"Cops aren't stupid at all," she snapped. "They're just smart enough to insist on knowing all the answers. So tell you what. You go to the phone and call Lieutenant Yonkers and explain carefully that you've just shot a Marandanian Marauder in my living room. Tell him

you've collected one of your Great Galactics, only he's defunct. See how far you'll get!"

Dusty looked at her blankly.

"The first stop will be the bull pen," she went on hotly. "The second stop is the nut-locker. And the third stop is some unknown star a thousand years from now while the F.B.I. try to match the guy's fingerprints. Then you call on me for a witness and that gets us the front page in big black letters saying: 'Former Hero Shoots Rival In Leading Lady's Boudoir!' Start thinking right, Dusty Britton. Or," she added scathingly, "call up one of your writers."

Dusty considered. "I could slope out of here and—"

"Like hell you will!" she screamed. "You're not leaving me here with a body to explain."

"But defending your rep—"

Barbara's scorn was high. "Look, Dusty, ever since we were sighted offshore in the *Buccaneer* . . ."

"Trouble is that we can't even run," grumbled Dusty. "This is your apartment."

Barbara looked down at Scyth. "Damned nuisance," she said. She poked at his side with her toe.

The nuisance groaned. The sound was hollow and weak but it seemed to ring through the room like the cry of a wailing ghost.

Barbara cried: "He's alive—"

"—not dead!" blurted Dusty. "Get water and stuff."

Slowly they stretched Radnor out on his back. Barbara went for her first aid kit while Dusty slid off Scyth's jacket and ripped the shirt free. The wound looked frightful, but some sponging with hot water and alcohol reduced the horror. It was low on one side, somewhere near the floating ribs on the right.

"Flesh wound?" asked Dusty hopefully.

"I wouldn't know. Maybe." Barbara flipped the pages of a large book from her library, a book that had not been used much. "It says a compress."

Dusty made a pad of bandage and cotton and covered the hole. He taped it down and then wrapped the shat-

tered hand with a cloth. Scyth groaned again and Barbara cracked open an inhalant vial and put the stuff under Radnor's nose.

"Wh—wha—di' you hi' me wi'?"

Dusty never knew whence he found the moral strength to be hard boiled. But all of a sudden, the feeling that this was a ghastly mess left him; his next feeling was one of confidence and self-justification. "It's called a belly gun," he said. "But you'll be all right in a couple of months. Maybe three."

Scyth-*tried* to struggle up but failed. He fell back and lay there glaring at them. He gasped, "Cou'le munce?"

"Sure. Stop crying. It's just a flesh wound."

"Bu' in cou'le munce—'ll be—bar'rine fiel'—gone—"

"Take it, Scyth. Sure. It's tough," said Dusty in a cold, matter-of-fact voice. "You've played and lost, but that's all right. Be a good loser. You've got a lot of company."

"Com'any?"

"Sure. There's millions of guys who've lost their future and their birthright over the flick of a hemline. We're a primitive sort of race, old man, but you'll find we're both healthy and lusty. Forget Marandis and your dingbusted beacons. Maybe you can help us build a spacecraft—after we get through this barytrine business your friends cooked up for us."

'Bu' can—mus' not— Chat an' Bren—die—"

"Nonsense."

Barbara plucked at Dusty's sleeve. "He's talking about his friends, Chat and Bren. On Mercury, remember?"

"Oh, don't worry about them."

"But . . . don't you see, Dusty? If we go into the barytrine field, and trap Scyth and his spacecraft with us, his friends will be marooned on Mercury."

Dusty nodded quickly. "Sure and that's what I'm counting on. They'll not start Sol into a variable until Scyth gets back. So—"

"Don't be blind. They won't start the variable star, but no one can stop the barytrine field. They'll still be marooned."

Dusty grinned. "You don't think a gang this advanced would be so dumb as to leave a couple of their kind marooned on a place like Mercury, do you? Well, I'll tell you how I've got it figured, Barb. Exactly eight seconds after Scyth does not land as per schedule, Chat and Bren will be calling for help on these phanoband things. That'll take care of them. But as for this guy, let's cheer up. We've got a sort of hostage. Scyth will be most happy to make a spacecraft for us as soon as he gets back on his feet. Chat and Bren will, of course, be taken care of some thousand years before we—"

Scyth groaned loudly.

"Huh?" demanded Dusty.

"S'no'so. Bren an' Chat—alone. No—no—famban—phan'ban'—phanoban' on Mer'cry. Die—"

Barbara started to say, "But your company—" but Dusty turned quickly and slapped a broad hand over her mouth.

"Shut up," he whispered in her ear swiftly. "He's got to think there is no help. He's forgotten that someone knows they're here. Play it by ear and follow my lead."

"What can you hope to do?"

"I don't know," said Dusty, "but I'm hoping that I find out." Loud enough for Scyth to hear, Britton asked, helplessly, "But what can we do?"

"Car—ou'side. Spacer. Pocket—map."

Dusty made a dive for Scyth's jacket and found a folded road map in one of the pockets. Like any stranger in a strange land, Scyth had outlined the route in a heavy blue pencil. His travel was detailed, it took the man more familiar with the district no more than a glance to place the location of Scyth's big spacecraft.

Scyth rested a moment and then went on: "Hurt—can be—doc'or on Maran'is. Hurry—"

Dusty grunted. "And who's going to run this spacecraft of yours?"

"You—easy—I help—tell—you—drive—"

Barbara looked at Dusty cynically. "It's your show—"

Spaceman Officer." She laughed hysterically. "Dusty Britton Rides Again!"

Dusty slapped her across the face to shock her out of it. Then he bent down to look at Scyth. The compress was soaked. Dusty touched it gently and looked up at Radnor's face. "Hurt?"

"Can' tell. Hur' all over."

"Gonna hurt more, Scyth. C'mon. Make a break."

Dusty put his arm under the Marandanian's shoulder and slowly lifted him to a sitting position. The man groaned.

Dusty lifted Radnor as gently as he could, and with Barbara opening doors, he carried Scyth to his big car.

"Why not take his?"

"Like mine better," he said with a shake of his head at the rental-agency model Scyth had come in.

Barbara found blankets from the trunk and made a soft cushion for Scyth. "You take care of him and I'll drive."

Barbara shook her head. "I—you take care of him and I'll drive."

"But I know the route."

"I can read a map as well as you can."

Radnor opened his eyes wearily. "You take care—of one another—and *I'll* drive!" Then he passed out cold.

Four hours' drive into the foothills, far from the lights of civilization, Dusty found the big spacecraft. It was parked in a small valley and it was colored so that only a man who knew what he was seeking and where it was would have found it.

On the way, Radnor babbled about the drive and how to run the big ship. Happily, Scyth's periods of delirium were easy to separate from his periods of lucidity. When Scyth began to babble, he talked cynically about the stupidity of taking four hours to travel less than a couple of hundred miles when they could cover light years in the matter of minutes. Then he would become quite rational, and tell Dusty how to recognize the beacons

as they came into sight, and where the charts were. He had to get back to Marandis, and he told Dusty the way.

Then his mind would wander a bit, and Scyth would chuckle quietly over something entirely removed from spacemanship. Then would come a discussion of the levers that must be turned and the meters that must be watched; how to turn the correct knob, or to push the proper pedal. He spoke of cautions, too. They must not turn on the space drive until the ship had warmed for a certain length of time (which the menslator interpreted to Dusty as a vague quantity of minutes. To be safe, Dusty decided to wait twice that long) and then Scyth would lapse again.

But as the drive went on Scyth's periods of lucidity waned. His moments of babbling dropped too; and between them both came longer and longer periods of just dead silence and heavy breathing.

Yet by the time Dusty maneuvered the car underneath one tailfin, he had a good idea of how to run the spacecraft.

CHAPTER XIII

Dusty carried Scyth Radnor to the salon and dropped him on a divan. He left Barbara to take care of the Marandanian while he went aloft into the control room to take over.

Once inside the room, Dusty Britton stopped short.

He was a savage in a Plutonium refining plant, a tone-deaf idiot standing before a four-console organ, an illiterate in a library. There were meters and switches and levers and toggles, neatly mounted on gleaming black panels and clearly lettered in shining white. He stared at a pilot lamp labelled "ἐβρήθαμε, Φήν' ἐγώ" and wondered whether the gleam of red meant that the spaceport was

still open, or that smoking was forbidden for the time being.

And he was supposed to drive this nightmare!

Stunned, Dusty dropped into the pilot's chair and looked around in a completely dazed manner. Below his feet were pedals; just below the surface of the slanting panel were a pair of knee-flappers that could be pressed without losing the thrust on a foot pedal. The desk-like thing was studded with large levers mounted in curve-segments, all carefully marked in the calibrations of the Marandanian language. To his left was a panel filled with push-buttons; it ran from the floor to the level above his head, where his long arm could reach while he sat. To his right was a similar panel. Dead ahead was a flat plate; it looked like frosted glass and seemed to be about as useful. It glowed not, nor did it show a spot of color other than the very logical reticule-lines which were to be used for aiming the ship. Above the plate of glass was a line of meters, matched by another line of them below.

Dusty shivered. No matter which way he reached he could touch buttons, or thumb levers, or turn dials.

No doubt, a competent Marandanian pilot played this console like a pianist. Given the aptitude, it was then a matter of training; when the concert master calls for 'A' the musician automatically reaches for the right position and drops his forefinger. But this ship was no instrument to play by ear.

Or—was it?

"Barb!"

"Yes, Dusty?"

"Barb, find that menslator and bring it up here. It might . . ."

A moment later, she came up the stairs with the small instrument in her hands. She gasped as she saw the array of controls. "I thought he said it was easy."

"To him," sighed Britton. He fitted the menslator on his shoulder by its strap and explored the controls. He hit one setting which made Barbara cry out inexplicably (which irritated him); he found another setting which

made him feel like a hundred and seventy pounds of toothache (then he forgave Barbara); and after some more fiddling with the tuning and the gain Dusty hit the right setting.

Everything became clear to him.

Directly in front of him was a meter that read "Rhenic Doubler Current"; to one side was a lever labelled "Phanoband Isolator" and some pushbuttons marked "Polylateral Overload Reset" and "Primary Exchange Test." The rest, too, were very logical but equally meaningless. "Drive Pulse Synchronizer" must have some definite function, because it was a large lever almost in the middle of the desk-panel. What one did with it was taught in the first grade of spaceman's school, no doubt. There was a large and interesting handwheel labelled "Drive Angle Trim"; Dusty suspected that it was used to equalize the drivers, so the ship wouldn't yaw in flight—but he couldn't be sure. There was something called the "Preflight Check Sequence," which probably checked the multitudinous functions of the instruments as it was turned from position to position; but just what it did, or what it told the pilot, remained obscure to Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol.

There was one instrument he recognized instantly. The label said, reading from left to right "Off, Warm-up, Stand-by, Operate." It was a big four-position hand-lever and was all very fine—only what was the following step?

"Can Scyth help—?" pleaded Dusty.

"He's out cold, like a Northern Light. Lost blood and—"

"But how'm I to run this godawful thing?"

"I don't know. Try something."

"What?"

She pointed to a small button high on the front panel beside the glazed plate. It said, "SP/MBJ-3 Phanoband 22."

Dusty looked at the nameplate and the menslator helped him translate the nameplate into "Space, Commercial/Non-adjustable, High-power, Emergency—Model Three. Phanoband Twenty-Two."

Dusty Britton looked at Barbara, and shrugged. This was an emergency, so he put out a forefinger and pressed the button.

A pilot lamp winked from blue to red and a meter on the forepanel rose. There was a momentary whirring from far below; then, along the bottom of the ground-glass looking window in front of him, a small circle became luminous. A man's face appeared.

He was obviously in some sort of uniform; alien though it was it had that air. The collar was high and the effect was uncomfortable. A pair of gold diagrams glistened on one shoulder. The man looked human enough to be the local desk-sergeant in costume dress.

As soon as the little circle was completely clear, the man said, "Distress Call received. Identify yourself, state your position, define your danger, and estimate the time remaining in which you have a factor of safety."

Dusty blinked and then looked at Barbara. She shrugged. Dusty shrugged back and said, "Are you Marandis?"

"This is Marandis Emergency. Identify yourself, state your pos . . ."

"Stop talking like a robot—or are you a robot?"

"I am not! What is the meaning of this? You are using a distress-call band for . . ."

"This is a distress call," snapped Dusty. "And part of the distress is that I can't identify myself, because I don't know the language."

"You'll have . . ."

"The other part of the distress is that the man who knows what this is all about has had a bad accident, and is likely to die if he is not given medical attention. So you tell me what to do next."

"Who are you?"

"I am Dusty Britton, if that means anything."

"I don't know you."

"Of course not. I've never been to Marandis. I'm not a Marandian. I'm just a character of the race your

playmates term 'Backward,' and/or 'Primitive.' But you better do something fast."

"What is the name of the injured party?"

"Scyth Radnor."

"Then your identity is Exploration License K-221-Y. I know Radnor. I must get you off the distress band. Please switch to Space Communications, Band Forty-Five. I . . ."

"Wait," said Britton quickly. "As a member of another solar culture, you must be aware of the fact that I am not familiar with your equipment. Which knob do I twist, and how far?"

The Marandanian gave Dusty instructions, and waited until a second small circle appeared beside the first, with a different face in it. This face was older and not in uniform. The man said, "Please explain the nature of your difficulty. I am Gant Nerley."

"The danger is complex," said Dusty. "Some time ago, your Transgalactic Company began operations that would turn our sun into a variable, in order to provide a beacon for a galactic rift. Naturally, we take a dim view of this sort of high-handed practise. However, at the present time Scyth Radnor is lying wounded and likely to die, while Chat Honger and Bren Fallow are marooned on the darkside of our innermost planet, because the spacecraft is on the third planet. The third planet is to be enclosed in a barytrine field, which will remove Scyth from circulation for a thousand years, and also maroon the other pair on Mercury."

"I see," said Gant Nerley thoughtfully. "There is a rather complicated problem to solve. Scyth Radnor alone would not be difficult. We could leave him alone, and arrange to have him taken care of after he gets out of the barytrine field. Actually, Scyth might even get into the hands of a medic faster that way—for him, that is—since his body will not feel one second of the time passed in the field, and as soon as the field drops off one of our ships could land. But the other pair will be more difficult to handle. Can you state your location?"

"Hardly."

"I suppose not. If we don't know where you are from here, the chance that a non-galactic culture would know where we are from there is indeed remote."

"Haven't you a filed plan of operations?" demanded Dusty. He used a tone of voice which indicated an assumption that any culture above the ape level wouldn't let people go tearing all over the universe, juggling stars and ruining the scenery, without first having filed a program which bore the approving signatures of twenty-seven authorities.

"There is a filed plan," said Nerley defensively. "But naturally it is sealed, as a matter of protection for the company."

"And no provision for emergency?"

"Only by the consent of the licensed company."

"Then you'd better call a conference at once. Scyth Radnor isn't going to last long enough for you to comb the galaxy for us."

"That's why it might be better to let the barytrine field run to completion."

Dusty's voice grew hard. "I wish you birds would stop tossing off a thousand years of our life with the flick of a finger."

"What difference does it make? You'd not notice it, and . . ."

"Who says so?" snapped Britton.

"Time is of importance only when its passage can be measured in reference to outside events. You have no contact with outside events. Therefore it makes no difference whether you come in contact with us now, or a thousand years from now—so long as the same people of your culture are involved."

"Now see here . . ."

"Permit me to present an example. If the barytrine field went on at this instant, one thousand years from now my successor would pick up the thread of the conversation from the recording we are making, and continue. As far as you are concerned, the only difference would be a

sudden flick of the viewscreen and a rather abrupt change in the facial characteristics of your conferee."

Gant Nerley waited a moment to let the point sink in. "Now, since you and I have very little in common, it should make little difference to you whether you spoke to me or to someone else. And as far as I am concerned, I feel the same. I have long since ceased feeling regretful that I cannot retain the friendship of the hundreds of thousands of people with whom I must converse. I have almost stopped being regretful of the fact that there are so many worlds that no single lifetime would permit a visit to more than a fraction. Therefore I suggest that you try to take a long-range attitude. You sound as though the troubles of a world you never saw were of prime importance to you."

"Look," said Dusty testily, "a lot of what you claim may be true. But we have a couple of thousand years of observational data on the planets and the nearby stars. You may take a thousand years out of our lives in the twinkle of a second, but then we spend another five hundred on top of that finding out where we are."

"You have time."

"We have not!" roared Britton. "Move us to a new system and I'll tell you what will happen. Before we can make a move into space we have to chart the new system completely, because we admit that our reaction motors are not efficient enough to take off without a well pre-charted course. We must know the orbits of the planets to a fine degree before we start. Then, before we can make a try for the stars, we've got to spend years and years in observation charting the nearest stars, observing whether they might have planets. Now . . ."

"Pardon me, but the information I have regarding your system is before me. Your space travel is primitive and any form of real commerce is as yet impossible. This I get from the license application for barytrine operations. Now, how can you justify your statements about interstellar travel?"

Dusty Britton, no matter what else, was a good actor,

even though he would never play Hamlet or Julius Caesar; a custard pie in the face was the general level of his art. He knew this, and realized instinctively where his strength lay for the purpose of the present argument.

A student of science could not have faced Gant Nerley without giving deference to the Marandanian's obviously superior knowledge, position, and experience. The learned man makes no flat-footed statements; this leads to the odd belief that most learned men are not entirely sure of themselves. It is the man unaware of his own ignorance who can stand up and proclaim chapter and verse, as though there could be no rebuttal.

So Dusty Britton, who could portray a reasonably convincing wounded hero, while counting the minutes before the next martini, being the kind of person who never allows facts to interrupt his flow of words, did not hesitate to imply that he knew much more than the Marandanian suspected. He sensed that he had Gant Nerley on the defensive, and could accomplish something if he kept Nerley off balance long enough.

Dusty braced himself, and tried to reduce to double-talk what he recalled of Scyth Radnor's previous statements.

"Interstellar travel is, of course, based upon obvious errors in the theoretical mathematics of general relativity," said Dusty, in the way he recited alleged science in Dusty Britton And The Space Patrol. "Of the many schools of thought which have their own theories on how to explain these obvious errors, the group-velocity field seems to be the most successful. But all of them are seeking some evidence to support their theories, and a couple of them—namely the gravitic and the magnetic-field proponents—state that such evidence has already supported their claims. Now, if such is the case, you know it will not be long before some practical experiment will disprove the illogic of providing a finite limit to an infinite system. Once this has been established, it seems obvious that star-travel is the next step."

"Hmmm—I see. This is a situation that must be con-

sidered more carefully. May I ask, what is your position in your society?"

"I am Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol," said Dusty with the proper tone of respect. "Commander in Chief of the Junior Division."

"Indeed! A real Space Patrol!"

Dusty nodded at the viewscreen. "It may be a bit ambitious," he remarked with even more deference, carefully studied. "But we feel that there is small point in using a conservative name, and then having to change it every couple of years."

"Quite sensible an attitude."

Dusty nodded again. "Fact is," he said deprecatingly, "we would probably be quite a bit more advanced in our space operations if our sister planets were not so inimical to human life. As it is, our operations are limited, and will be limited until we can provide the necessary conversions to Terrestrial conditions."

Gant Nerley nodded back. "Man is not an adaptable animal," he observed. "He does not change himself to suit his environment, he changes his environment to suit himself."

"That's what I mean."

"Then why do you object so much to this barytrine field? We can always pick you a stellar group less inimical to human life, and thus advance you faster."

Dusty grunted under his breath; he had talked too much. "Buster," he said angrily, "logic like that will only get you a fat lip."

Gant Nerley blinked. "Tell me, Dusty, was Scyth Radnor hurt in some altercation over this beacon?"

Dusty decided that he might as well let Gant Nerley have the facts, cold and hard. "No," he said flatly, "Scyth was shot for monkeying around another man's woman."

Gant said, "Deplorable," in a tone of voice that indicated amused disgust, but not definite as to whether the disgust was over the act itself or Radnor's having been caught at it. "What happened?"

"The other man shot first," said Dusty, feeling that this

was no time to point out that it was he who pulled the trigger.

"I'm not surprised. Most primitives are inclined to be both hot-headed and impulsive."

"Tell me," asked Dusty in a cooing voice, "did Scyth confine his attention to primitives, or is it the custom among Marandans to consider your mate unattractive unless she can prove herself?"

"I don't understand," replied Nerley.

"Against primitives I can understand Scyth carrying a weapon for protection. Tell me, Gant Nerley, has your emotional balance become so stable that you can take the scholarly view? Or," added Dusty sharply, "do you have big black headlines about triangle slayings just like the rest of humanity?"

"Well, now, we . . ."

"Then don't blame us primitive souls for slugging someone caught off base!" snapped Dusty. "Now, what are we going to do about Scyth Radnor?"

"Regardless of his depredations against propriety, he must be given medical attention."

"This I will go along with. How shall we start? I can always take him to one of our hospitals."

"No. No! You must not."

"Why not? We're quite competent on gunshot wounds. We're probably more used to them than you are, as primitives with impulse and hot blood."

"Please. Let's not be facetious over any man's misfortune."

"In blunt words, the life of a character caught in an awkward situation is more important than someone else losing their familiar stellar scenery, and a couple of thousand years of climb up from the swamp of ignorance?"

"That is another question which I'm sure we can solve. Now—"

"Look," said Dusty firmly, "you agree to take measures for our safety, and we'll agree to take measures for Radnor's. Do you understand exactly what I mean or shall I explain in very blunt words?"

"That is blackmail."

"It's worse than that. But we're primitive, and therefore lacking in refinement. As far as I am concerned, Transgalactic can keep their secret of our position locked in their sealed file, Scyth Radnor can die, and Bren Fallow and Chat Honger can spend the rest of their lives marooned on Mercury."

"No. That wouldn't be right. You must bring Scyth back home."

"That's a fine ideal! May I suggest that your ship is not as familiar as mine?" Dusty did not mention that the only control room he was familiar with was the one on the Gramer Production Lot. That one was an aggregation of fantastic levers, flashing lights and futuristic three-phase busbars which (no doubt as to its success in the past) had a most profound effect upon the imagination of the youth of the land, but no effect upon space whatsoever.

"This can be taken care of. As a spaceman, you can understand the principles. They are simple. You can follow directions for flight."

"Yes? And which way do I go from here?"

"Not so fast. First, Dusty Britton, tell me the present condition of Scyth Radnor."

"Wait."

Dusty went below. Scyth was in shock. His temperature (taken with the flat of Dusty's hand) was chill, but there was a film of perspiration on Radnor's body. The breathing was shallow and the face was pale. Scyth's pulse was weak and the heartbeat thin.

Dusty drew a light blanket over the Marandanian, then went back to report.

Gant Nerley said, "In the salon you will find a medicine cabinet. The instructions are simple. Any intelligent being with a menslator should be able to follow them concisely. How is the bleeding?"

"Stopped. Clotted by now."

"Take care of Scyth, Dusty Britton. We'll figure out something for you."

"How about this barytrine field that's running away with itself?"

"We'll stop it. Behind you on the auxiliary panel you will see a knob and a pilot lamp. It's probably orange-colored. Turn the knob to the left."

Dusty did, and the lamp went out.

"That's it. I see that Scyth has the usual sloppy habits of his kind. No label. According to space regulations, the operator is supposed to slip a label into the frame above the auxiliary control whenever he has anything extra set up. I'll mark that oversight down on Radnor's record. Now . . ."

"What about Chat and Bren and that variable-star maker?"

Gant Nerley grunted. "If they're not keeping a close eye on the barytrine field detector, so they can shut off their own equipment when it fails, I'll revoke their licenses! They must be looking at the temporal field, or at least keeping watch."

"We hope."

Gant nodded, thoughtfully. "Now," he said, "this being an emergency, I'll open their course-plan so that I can direct you through space. Don't turn off the viewpanel, Dusty. I'll be back in a few minutes."

CHAPTER XIV

As soon as Gant Nerley's face disappeared from the viewpanel, Dusty turned to face Barbara. She was standing far to one side out of range of the viewpanel and stifling a giggle. She let her breath out slowly through her hands as Dusty caught her eye.

"Funny as hell," he said. "Me—I'm hysterical."

Barbara Crandall sobered immediately. "Honest,

Dusty. I was not laughing at you. I was laughing with you."

"Why?"

"Because you really fooled him. Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol. Yes, I can navigate a ship."

"I'm going to. Want out?"

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," she said. "I'm glad we've got the whole galaxy for you to make mistakes in."

"Stop making fun. Let's try to think of something sensible, Barb."

"Too bad we haven't time to take a run back to the city."

"What good would that do?"

"Well, you could show them that bauble you're wearing, and I could try the menslator out on them, and maybe between us we could convince them that there's something more in this tale of mine than wind."

"That's an idea," Britton agreed, "but it's out."

"I know. But . . . Dusty, you'll have to carry it to Gant Nerley yourself."

"Carry what?"

Barbara shook her head impatiently. "Think!" she cried. "Dusty, you heard Gant say that this license might be rescinded due to the fact that Sol seems to have evolved above the minimum level of acceptability."

"Yes."

"Then go in there with your head up, and let them know how we're built."

Dusty waved at the field of instruments on the control position. "Open my mouth and let them know how ignorant we are? We should have a couple of scientists along."

"No," she said slowly. "One of the marks of a real scientist is that he usually assumes he knows a lot less than he does. You're better off. You don't know enough to confuse yourself. Besides, Dusty, you're an actor."

"Um . . . er . . . Jeeks! Hang on a moment, will you?"

Dusty loped down the stairs to his car and opened the

compartment behind the front seat. It was his emergency kit; it held his Dusty Britton uniform, the complete regalia of The Space Patrol complete with Dusty Britton "Blaster"—concealed against the days when Dusty found himself trapped in public, and could not appear out of character.

He changed in the car and went back to the control room.

Barbara took one look at him and nodded slowly. "You're a gaudy sight, but maybe that's what is needed."

Dusty slapped the "Blaster" at his hip. "I look authentic enough, except for this hunk of hardware. Hell, it isn't even as useful as a dress sword."

"Your revolver? Oh. Still on my living room floor."

Dusty unbelted the holster. "I shouldn't have to go armed everywhere, should I?"

"I suppose not."

"All right, then. How do I look?"

Barbara smiled, thin. "Dusty, no one on Earth would ever accuse you of being anything but a Hollywood actor in that get-up. But a man from halfway across the Galaxy itself might not know about these things. You're impressive-looking. But don't get pompous."

"Just you remember that I'm Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol, and don't giggle when I start pouring it on."

"I won't. After all, I call myself an actress, you know." She looked nervously at the viewpanel.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm nervous, but I'll be all right."

Dusty went over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Take a deep breath," he commanded. She did. "Now let it out slowly." She did that, too. "Now," he said softly, slipping an arm around her and leading her to the stairway, "you come down below and relax. Pull yourself together, Barb. We'll make it—somehow."

"Got any ideas?"

"Not yet. But . . ."

Above, the voice of Gant Nerley came back. Dusty

raced aloft and apologized for having been absent. Nerley was nodding with admiration at something below the level of the viewpanel, probably something on the desk.

Gant looked up after a moment. "Dusty Britton, this is really a remarkable route. Truly fantastic. So well hidden, and yet right within our grasp all of these centuries! Well, you shall see, Dusty. And doubtless you will agree."

"Okay, let's get going."

"Not so fast, young man. I'm waiting for the direction-finding stations to report, so that I can determine where along this prospected route you lie."

"We're about two-thirds of the way out from the center, I believe," offered Dusty.

"That's a rather inaccurate generality. You know where you are, and we know where we are, but we must know where we are with respect to one another before we can make contact. Now . . ." Gant's voice stopped suddenly as something caught his eye above the lens of the viewpanel. He looked over Dusty's head, apparently, so intently that Britton himself turned to see what Nerley was staring at. He saw only instruments, and realized that Gant was looking at another panel-section above the one that communicated with Dusty's panel.

"Um," said Gant. "You would appear to lie in what we call 'Sector G-18, Coordinate 307, Galactic Angle 215.86-plus degrees, South altitude-angle 1.017-minus degrees, Co-frame 9654.' Now, Dusty, in your terms, where lies the Galactic Center?"

Dusty laughed. The tone of his laugh was half bitter and half a note of self-disparagement. "Sorry, Gant. We frame our reference from Terra, naturally."

"I do not quite understand what you mean."

"We compute stellar positions in latitude from the angle above or below the equator of Terra, which we call 'Declination,' and in longitude by their rise as the planet rotates, which we call 'Right Ascension.' Therefore the so-called 'Celestial equator' is a projection of

the Earth's equator upon the sky, and the colures pass from celestial pole to celestial pole, which are projections of Terra's axis. Now, since the Earth's equator is tilted with respect to the Earth's orbit, and the Earth's orbit is tilted with respect to the Galactic Equator, I'll be darned if I know how to explain in mutual terms. Oh, we assume that the galactic center is in a region of the sky we call 'Sagittarius,' but that is meaningless."

"I agree. Wait a moment."

Gant Nerley turned from the 'window' in Dusty's viewpanel and walked away from it by several yards. He worked over a complicated keyboard for some minutes and then returned.

"Dusty," he said, "I think we can handle this as follows. To your left hand near the top of the control board you will find a key-lever marked Phanobeacon. Pull it towards you."

Dusty looked, found the key, and pulled. A bright spot of light appeared on the viewpanel, high in the left hand corner. "That is the true position of Marandis," said Nerley. "If you tried to make it at transgalactic speeds, you'd plough into about forty stars and hit about nineteen gas-clouds. You'd either blow up, or spend the rest of your life running at safe velocities. However, if you take off and steer your spacecraft so as to put that beacon spot on the calibration lines G-705, F-318, you should find the next rift-beacon somewhere near to the cross-hairs of the viewpanel. Got it?"

"I think so."

"Good. Now, for take-off instructions."

"Ready."

Gant Nerley began a running patter of instructions. Dusty soon found that one does not step into the pilot's chair of a complex device such as a galactic cruiser, push a pedal and then steer—any more than a Wall Street Accountant could step into the cockpit of a six-engine airliner and take off. There was the preflight checkoff—probably performed by the competent Marandian Pilot in a matter of minutes, and quite possibly done

with an automatic reflex action which would permit the accomplished pilot to daydream about the girl on the next planet meanwhile. Only the appearance of the wrong pilot-lamp response would bring him out of his automatic response with an abrupt recognition of something awry.

But Dusty was not a pilot, and certainly not a pilot of a Marandanian Spacecraft, so the preflight checkoff took almost an hour. Nearly ninety-nine percent of the time, he was following Gant Nerley's instructions blindly: Does the pilot lamp registering power source show red or green? Does the spacelock indicator show closed? Turn the atmosphere control to Internal. Set the auto-gravity corrector to Controlled. Costator circuits to Regulated; antimagnetic response dial to zero; space-coordinate servo control to Stellar Display. Planetary Drive to Automatic Threshold; match the Gravitic Constant to the Power Delivery. Set the Master Control to Preflight Warmup.

"Now," said Gant Nerley, "take it slow and easy. Take the 'Tee' bar gently. Find the thumb-buttons and press them both evenly. Spread your knees against the paddles under the control panel slowly, and press the Force pedal with your right foot. Tell me, what is your trans-atmospheric velocity?"

"It says 416."

"Too high. Press the Compensator pedal with your left foot until the TAV meter reads 312."

"Now."

"Hold it that way until the Matter Per Cubic Meter indicator drops below the red line."

"The TAV meter is dropping below 312."

"Good. Let up on the Compensator pedal and depress the Force pedal more. Keep the TAV meter at 312."

"The Matter Per Cubic Meter indicator is below the red line, Gant."

"Free the Compensator pedal. Push the Force pedal all the way home, and kick it to the right. Now read the Transatmospheric velocity meter."

"Dropping rapidly."

"Good. And the MCPM?"

"Dropping rapidly."

"Excellent. Spread the knee-paddles wide and lock them. Have you a reading yet on the Space Velocity Meter?"

"Just getting off the peg."

"Um—it is a little early, but that's all right. It will arrive in due time. Keep an eye on the Foreign Body Indicator, Dusty. Any reading?"

"No."

"Good. Don't touch the 'Tee' bar, Dusty. That's the steering mechanism and it is in neutral. Is there any indication on the viewpanel yet?"

"Not yet."

"You haven't enough velocity yet," said Gant. "But when it appears, it will look like a star map. Now, the central cross-hair is the point of aim of your spacecraft. If the star you want lies, say to the upper left, move the 'Tee' bar forward and to your left. That will swing the ship in that direction, and you can line up the drive with the target. Also, since angular position is important when moving in three free dimensions, twisting the crossbar of the 'Tee' will cause the ship to rotate on its axis. The map will turn in the direction, apparently, but it is really the ship turning. That is . . ."

"I'm beginning to get a presentation now," said Britton.

"Good. Dim and reddish, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Now get this straight and clear: The phano-beacon is the control beacon for direction of angular curve. In other words, it takes three points to define the orientation of a plane in space. These three points are you, the star-beacon or course-marker which you will find directly, and the main terminal-beacon which is the phano-beacon. You must drive your ship in the proper plane when making a curve or making any turn. Follow?"

"Yes," replied Dusty, trying to think it out. He was far from certain about all this; he wondered why it was all necessary. He went over the instructions in his mind, made no more sense out of them than the first time, then decided to accept them without trying to figure out the reasons. After all, Gant Nerley and his colleagues ought to know what they were doing.

"Now," said Gant, after a moment, "in order to orient yourself, you must line up the phanobeacon on the point of aim. Take the 'Tee' bar firmly, one hand on either side of the axle. Find the thumb-buttons on the handle. Press them all the way in and lock them home with a slight sidewise pressure towards the center. Got that? Now, lift the 'Tee' bar straight up, until it is high enough to manipulate with ease. Be careful, don't move it side-wise!"

The last admonition was wasted. Dusty lifted the 'Tee' bar gingerly and not too evenly. The stars on the viewpanel danced dizzily, swiveled, and flowed across the plate. The bright phanobeacon spot moved from the plate along the bottom, danced back in view on a brief curve, and left again along a flat slant. The 'Tee' bar clicked into place and the stars stopped dancing with a snap. Dusty moved the 'Tee' bar gently; the stars flowed upward until the phanobeacon reappeared.

"Got it," he said shakily. He moved the 'Tee' bar very gently until the phanobeacon was centered on the screen—or, rather, almost centered. It moved in jerky little circles like the sights of a rifle in the hands of a tyro.

"Fine. You're doing very well with strange equipment. Now, on the panel you will find a switch marked 'Coordinates.' It will be set on 'Rectangular' and you must flip it to 'Polar.'"

The switch changed the cross-hair pattern of the viewpanel from the horizontal and vertical calibrations to a circular pattern, with only the main center hairlines remaining. Angle-lines radiated out from the center, crossing the circles.

"Now, Dusty, inspect the radius-line marked G-705.

Check it all the way around. Do you see a winking star?"

"No."

"Um. I was hoping we could do it the easy way. The sealed course-plan is not too clear, for which I don't blame Transgalactic. All right, we'll have to do it the hard way. Move the phanobeacon down until it is almost on the lower edge of the viewpanel. Now flip the 'Coordinates' switch to the left, leaving it in the bottom position marked 'Polar.' You'll find that the toggle has an 'H' type pattern of motion, laid flatwise."

The polar coordinates disappeared completely from the center of the viewpanel and centered around the phanobeacon spot. They made larger and larger arcs as the circles approached the top of the panel.

"Now this is going to be tricky. You must twist the 'Tee' bar slowly and let the ship rotate, but you must also move it so that the phanobeacon stays near its present off-center position. Before you do this, let me explain what you are actually doing in space. Picture a needle-shaped spacecraft with a line along the axis running out in front of the ship, marking its line of drive, or direction. At some distance beyond the line lies a spot, which denotes the phanobeacon. Somewhere out beyond that is another spot. This last spot must be sighted within the confines of an angle not greater than the angle made between the point of aim, or line of drive, and the imaginary line running from the nose of the ship to the phanobeacon. So you must make the ship rotate on a false axis, making the line of flight describe a cone of revolution, with the phanobeacon on the axis of the cone. Now, go ahead and try."

"Okay." Dusty moved the 'Tee' bar, and the stars seemed to ripple in a scallop pattern along a greater arc. The center of the beacon held the polar lines, but these seemed to move with the stars and with the beacon. It made Britton dizzy and his eyes began to ache. "What am I looking for?" he asked plaintively.

"Look along the outer circles for a winking st—"

"Got it!"

"Good. Turn the 'Tee' bar to neutral," said Nerley, "return the 'Coordinate' switch back to the center of the 'H' pattern. Center the stellar course beacon on the point of aim."

The winking star flashed at Dusty Britton like a flag. It danced crazily as he manipulated the 'Tee' bar like a rookie pilot. There was so much to do, so many things to handle, so many motions to make. Dusty gripped the 'Tee' bar tightly, too tightly. When he let go with one hand to flip a switch, or to make an adjustment, the grip of his other hand moved the bar. It became sweaty and sticky; then it became slippery, and he gripped it even tighter. This made matters worse, as he strove to hold the handles tighter and tighter.

In a jagged line like the trail of a rising smoke, the winking star appeared to approach the center of the viewpanel. There it hung, wobbling around in tiny circles, and occasionally making a brief jerky dart to one side or the other. Dusty mopped his face and the beacon star jumped; he grabbed the handle again. The star leaped across the center and wobbled on the other side of zero-zero.

"Got it," he said in a quavering voice.

"Now rotate the ship until the phanobeacon is on the vertical hairline. Then flip the switch to 'Rectangular' again."

The stars rippled around in the viewpanel until the phanobeacon was on the vertical line. The field leaped a bit as Dusty found the Coordinates switch and returned the calibration-presentation to the horizontal and vertical hairlines.

"Now?" he asked.

"You have a bit of time. Be certain that the star-marker lies firm and true. Be carefull"

Britton gripped the handles and tried to steady his shaking hands. Then, because he had no more complicated motions to make, he relaxed a bit. The dancing star-field slowed its mad vibration, which calmed Dusty's jumping nerves still more.

He leaned back in the pilot's chair slowly; his grip on the 'Tee' bar was lighter, and more true. He looked at the beacon star and saw what Chat Honger, Bren Fallow, and Scyth Radnor were trying to do with Sol.

The star lay there on the center of his panel like a winking flashlight. Lost in a field, which showed a myriad of points, some cloudy, some a band of milky white, the beacon would have been nothing without that steady wink-wink-wink. Dusty Britton had no notion of where he was; he knew only that Earth must be far behind. Sol, a small, yellow, average dwarf star would show nothing to call attention to itself from the distance of a few light years. But the winking beacon on Dusty's viewpanel was like a banner being waved from a distant shore.

No man is lost so long as he can see a lighthouse flashing.

Dusty took a deep breath. "Barb!" he called.

She came up the ladder. "Call me?"

"How's Scyth?" he asked.

"He's doing all right. How're you doing?"

Dusty grinned. "Martin Gramer should see me now. This is simple, and I . . ."

Barbara screamed and Dusty whipped his head back to look at the viewpanel.

One of the stars, lost in the glitter of the distant background had detached itself from the immobile sky. It was moving, forward, and its glow was brightening. It came hurtling towards them like a white-hot cannonball. One second it was no more than any other star—distant, aloof, and cold. Then it had become a visible disc, expanding like a puff of gas. It came toward them like a ball of fire hurled into their faces.

Britton yelped and twisted on the 'Tee' bar; the stars rolled dizzily across the plate—but not until the white hot monster had flipped past in a quick wave of heat and a flare of light.

Dusty's grip on the 'Tee' bar tightened; he moved the lever in little jerks until the stars returned to the proper

positions, and the phanobeacon was properly centered.

Gant Nerley's face showed concern. "What happened, Dusty?"

Dusty told the Marandanian, and Gant smiled knowingly. "Don't worry about it. It will happen again and again, and may be worse. But so long as you keep the course beacon centered properly, you will pass by—and not through—those interfering stars. Now, as soon as your beacon star shows a disc, steer up to keep the beacon centered on Line H-001. Once you pass the beacon, look for another beacon on Line F-312 and bring the point of drive to center on the new one. Follow?"

Dusty nodded at Nerley's image on the screen along the bottom of the viewpanel. Another star detached itself from the backdrop of stars and hurled toward the ship. The actor flinched, but held his drive. The star passed in a bright flash, and a quick wave of heat, and was gone. Dusty licked dry lips and forced his hands to relax. Far to one side, another star passed in a majestic sweep, too distant to bring them either heat or much more light than the ones called 'fixed' on the viewpanel.

Britton eyed the beacon suspiciously. Was it showing a disc yet? And how much time did he have to shift the drive once the disc became certain? He felt a cold wave wriggle down his spine, and knew that cold beads of sweat were beginning to ooze out of his face. Dusty was remembering the staggering speed of the first star that had come leaping at him.

Another star passed him in its characteristic wave of light and heat, and Dusty realized that what looked dangerously close on the viewpanel was quite distant in reality. It meant that so long as his ship was pointed into a clear space, there would be no danger of running into a star, no matter how close it seemed to be.

But the cold sweat came because the beacon star lay winking at him, right in the intersection of the crosshairs that marked the drive.

Disc? Did it show a disc? Does Sirius show more of a disc than Polaris?

Britton's hands pulled the 'Tee' bar slightly to move the winking eye ever so slightly upward. That way he would not be aiming his spacecraft dead into the searing hot maw of a variable star. He took a shaky breath and relaxed.

Gant Nerley shook his head. "I see what you are doing, Dusty, and you must not. At best, you'll make a wide curve, and get off the beam. At worst, you'll hit a star lying close to the course. You have no idea of how wide you'll run. Center it up, Dusty, and keep a close watch, for it *will* become a disc. You'll have time. Relax."

Reluctantly, Dusty Britton returned the "Tee" bar to the central position and the star winked through the crosshairs at him. It was no larger in diameter than the width of one line, but was not obscured by the lines because of the construction of the panel. Dusty could not understand the design. Dark lines should have hid the stars behind them, but on this gadget they did not. He looked closer and found that the stars themselves lay on top of the lines, rather than under them; he wondered how this effect was managed. He knew, of course, that it was a matter of design. Dusty's experience had been with small telescopes, but this was not an optical device, so the simple laws of optics did not obtain. And as he watched, the winking star became a winking disc, Dusty's nerves twitched.

When had the change started? Dusty realized that he had been half-hypnotized by the wink-wink-wink that meant both safety and ultimate danger. The disc was expanding rapidly, and as Britton tried to move the disc to Line H-001, the edge of the winking beacon expanded faster than the point of aim moved. He wrenched the "Tee" bar hard, and saw the crosshairs move sluggishly below the exploding circle. Then the beacon flashed past in a wave of heat far greater than any of the other stars, and he was blinded by the light for a second or more. But as the blindness died, there on Line F-312 there was a distant wink-wink-wink.

CHAPTER XV

Dusty gripped the 'Tee' bar and started to turn the ship toward the new beacon. His approach to dead center was ragged.

There is an interesting game designed to show human coordination: The victim is told to draw a square, with a cross inside connecting the corners, while the sight of his hand and pencil is blocked with a card and the only visibility is provided by means of a mirror, held vertically on the far side of the paper. The results of this experiment are rather interesting, and Dusty's approach to dead center was about as direct as the results of this stunt. He overshot and overcorrected, but finally he made it. And then with a burst of good sense, Dusty released the 'Tee' bar very gently and leaned back in his pilot's chair. The crosshairs remained on their winking beacon.

Gant Nerley nodded. "Turn the presentation to 'Polar' again, and keep a sharp eye out for a slow beacon along Radius Q-103. You probably made a wide curve around that other beacon, and you may be a bit too close to a gas field. You'd burn up in milliseconds if you hit it at your present speed. By the way, what color is the presentation now?"

"It's getting lighter. Sort of yellowish-white, like."

"Good. But if and when it begins to blue-up a bit, you'd better let up on the 'Force' pedal by a notch or more. Competent pilots can run with their screen in the violet, but you're far from a competent pilot."

He saw the look on Dusty's face and added hastily, "I mean that you've had no experience in galactic travel, Dusty Britton. You're doing magnificently, so far. We'd

best take no dangerous chances, though, until you have driven interstellar craft as many hours as you've driven your own interplanetary ships."

Barbara Crandall made a choked sound, then covered it by saying: "I see the slow beacon, Dusty. Out there on Circle D-212, along Radius Q-103."

It was pulsing slowly, rising to full brilliancy over a period of more than a minute and falling again, never really winking out to invisibility. It lay alone in the star field; the gas cloud behind it must be of the same nature as any of the so-called "dark nebulae," or dust clouds, that obscure the stars behind it. But it was far to one side (Circle D-212) and it seemed reasonable to view it calmly.

"How much time have I?" he asked Nerley.

"About fifteen minutes."

"Good. I want a cigarette and a drink."

It was with increased confidence that Dusty swooped around the next beacon and headed on towards the next—and the next; and then around a long curveway limned by four of the winking beacons; and once more along a long, long field-free course towards a winker that lay dead ahead for quite some distance.

There was one quick jog between two beacons set at an angle like the flags of a slalom run on skis; a wide 'S' curve around the outside of the first, up and over between, then out and around the second beacon in a long ogee to locate the freeway to the next beacon star. There was a quick turn that took the plane-locating phanobeacon off the screen for several minutes; and then another one that put the phanobeacon almost on the crosshairs; and then another slight turn that put the phanobeacon on the lower corner of the viewpanel again.

It was, according to Gant Nerley, a "most remarkable rift!" Dusty shrugged at this, because he had never seen any other rift. But he shuddered at the thought of what a really tortuous galactic passage would be like.

They passed by a vast, luminous cloud that lay on

the spacecraft's beam for several minutes. It looked as if merely a few miles separated them from it. They saw that it was marked by two of the slow-winking beacons.

The luminous cloud reminded them of a lake, seen from an automobile driving along a highway; they could not see the inner star that provided the energy for the luminosity of the cloud, and eventually they left the cloud behind them. They zipped between the elements of a star cluster that drove at them with multiple waves of heat; on and on they went, with Dusty Britton driving his Marandian Spacecraft like a child running a motorboat, following instructions shouted by a careful parent.

This did not make of Dusty Britton a space pilot, any more than turning the valve on a radiator makes one a heating engineer, or the replacing of a light socket makes an electrician. But Dusty began to glory in it; his confidence grew high as his skill increased.

His touch upon the 'Tee' bar became light and sure of itself. He no longer jerked the bar when a deviation became noticed; Dusty corrected his course with deft touches. He was learning, and was filled with self-confidence that he had no right to feel. Dusty Britton, who had never been in a space rocket in his life, drove a galactic spacecraft across the galaxy under what can be called "Dual Flight Training."

This is all right, so long as the trainee has enough space to make mistakes in. Dusty literally had galactic reaches and these were well marked against the pitfalls. And if Gant Nerley's face radiated confidence, and his voice sounded cheerful, it was due to Nerley's knowledge that constant admonition, warning, and cries of horror would only cause more trouble than Dusty Britton's meandering course.

But flight is easy, whereas landing is the most difficult maneuver in the universe.

So by the time Dusty Britton was homing on the main phanobeacon of Marandis itself, Gant Nerley had

his plans. Dusty Britton was not going to barrel that spacecraft down, tailfins first, like an elevator.

Britton came to a full zero-zero-zero landing a million miles above Marandis. He came to a grinding halt high above the planet, looked around dazedly, and asked Gant: "What makes?"

"Keep your drive at one gravity thrust," said Nerley. "Stand by for Pilot!"

The last order was delivered in a ringing voice, as though it were a standard procedure.

To Dusty Britton, familiar with the tactics used by seagoing liners upon entering port, standing by for a pilot was quite a sensible practise. If the Captain of *The North America* permitted a pilot to bend the big liner along Ambrose Channel, through The Narrows, and into New York Harbor, Dusty saw no objection to having a pilot come aboard to bend the big spacecraft down past whatever dangers might be presented by moons, meteors, and cosmic junk, through an atmosphere, and onto a spaceport under an unknown Constant of Gravity. Dusty replied in ringing tone: "Standing By for Pilot!"

Gant took a deep breath.

Minutes later, a small scooter hauled alongside and a Marandian came aboard. He smiled at Britton and said, "I'm Nort Wilgas, Pilot."

"Glad to have you aboard," replied Dusty. It all sounded very familiar; The Space Patrol had borrowed liberally from the clichés of naval procedure and courtesy, and Britton had been through these lines at least once in every picture. "I'm Dusty Britton." Then he remembered the role he was trying to play and added: "Of The Terran Space Patrol."

"Have a good passage?" asked Nort Wilgas.

"Yes. A bit tiring. After all, I've never driven a galactic spacecraft before. Frankly, I'm about flat on my face."

The Marandian pilot looked into Dusty's face with a perplexed frown. "You know," he said, "it's just occurred to me: You drove this thing all the way on duty!"

"Yes."

"Twenty-three hours!"

Dusty suddenly felt tired. He had been too busy with the control board to think of it before. He had been running on nervous energy, but now it had about run out. "Yes," he said. "I had to."

"Man! What stamina!"

Dusty yawned and came unglued on the divan opposite the one that Scyth Radnor occupied. Nort Wilgas nodded at him, then turned to Barbara. "You can relax, too. I'll take over."

Britton was fast asleep when the spacecraft made its landing on Marandis.

CHAPTER XVI

Dusty Britton awoke to find the sunshine streaming in through a small porthole and lighting the cabin cheerfully. The scent of fresh air was in his lungs, pungent, faintly reminiscent of cinnamon or nutmeg, yet not quite either. He recalled lying down on the divan in the salon; now he was in one of the cabins below the salon level. He wondered how he had arrived.

He stretched his muscles; the cool sheets felt pleasant against his back. He was looking around the cabin when the door opened, and a woman came in.

She was wearing white, from cap to slippers, and was obviously a nurse. She carried a book, with a finger slipped between pages to mark her place; in her other hand she held the Marandian equivalent of a cigarette. A pleasant curl of smoke rose from the lighted end.

"Hello," she offered brightly. "And how do we feel this morning?"

"We feel fine," said Dusty. "And we'll feel better

after a shower, a shave, and a smoke. I'd also enjoy a change of clothing."

"We took the liberty of having your uniform cleaned. The shower and shaving gear is in the bath—there—and as for the cigarette, I can offer you one right now." She handed him a case and snapped a lighter for him.

Dusty found that the substance, while far from tobacco, was agreeable enough. He took a deep puff and let the smoke filter out through his nose. "Not bad," said Dusty.

The nurse smiled at him quizzically. "We have stronger, if you want it."

"Stronger?" asked Dusty. "This stuff has an odd flavor, but I don't know if it has to be any stronger."

"I—er—you—?"

Dusty eyed the cigarette dubiously. "Sweetie," he asked with one eyebrow cocked, "would this be a goofball?"

"A—goofball?"

"Goofball. Locosmoke. Your Marandanian equivalent of loco weed, Jimpson weed, Marihuana, hemp, et cetera. Dope, in fee simple."

"I'm not entirely sure of your Terrestrial term," said the nurse. "It isn't precisely what could be called a wholly habit-forming narcotic. However, it does heighten the senses and generally make life a bit more pleasant. It's by no means illegal; it is used universally by almost everybody and you'll find many brands being sold in fierce competition."

Dusty eyed the nurse and saw a hidden shyness. "Yeah," he drawled. "And what makes you think I might enjoy the stronger blend?"

"Why, you must need something."

Dusty stretched luxuriously. "Something for what?"

The nurse tried to put on a professional air, but her personal interest in the matter showed through. She said, "the examination of Scyth Radnor disclosed that he had been well taken care of. Your Terrestrial women must demand quite a high level of virility."

Dusty curled the fingers of his right hand, blew on the fingernails gently, and buffed them on the lapel of his borrowed pajamas. "We do all right," he said in a Space Patrol drawl.

The nurse took a deep drag of her aromatic cigarette.

Dusty sat up straight in the bed. "Come herel" he said in a semi-harsh tone. As if in a dream, the nurse came forward until she was close enough to let Dusty take the cigarette from her fingers. He snubbed it out in the nearby ashtray and added his beside it. He retained a light grip on her hand, which she did not resist.

He exerted a gentle pressure and the nurse moved with it, not reluctantly but as a woman bemused. He had the fleeting thought that if he lifted one arm and bent its elbow she would hold it that way until it was re-arranged. The only sign of awareness was a widening of her eyes. She did not stare at him, nor could it be called watching him. But there was a definite fascination for him that finally ended in a gesture of slight shyness. She lowered her face by ever so little and looked at him from beneath the eyebrows.

But still she was unresisting as he drew her forward, a slow step by step and inch by inch until her thighs were against the bed.

Softly, Dusty said, "This is the way we do it."

His hands clasped her shoulders and turned her to face away, then he drew her back until she sat upon the edge of his bed. He bent her back over his lap and cradled her in his arms, one below her supporting her and the other free to caress her face. The palm of his hand smoothed her cheek and massaged it gently, urging her face over to meet him. His fingers tickled under her chin as he raised her face until he could meet her lips with his. He held her chin in the palm of his hand and his thumb and forefinger pressed to separate her lips.

The arm beneath her crushed her up and forward as her opened mouth responded to him. His free hand

smoothed her shoulder, slid easily underneath the stiff-starched uniform to caress hidden territory.

She wore a bra obviously issued by some government agency devoted to the mechanical process of containing breadbaskets rather than the concept of enhancing the body beautiful. Dusty worked at the surface of this iron-maidenform long enough to realize that the frontal attack was futile. He abandoned the hope of direct penetration and went into a search for the secondary tickle-spot; the sensitive spot just above the soft ribs where, if more than one pair of breasts exists, they occur. He twiddled across the spot. The secondary breasts were not there but the nerves were. The nurse tickled most satisfactorily and Dusty chuckled.

She leaned back in his arms and eyed him with clouded-eye affection. "What's so funny?"

"You're ticklish."

"So?"

"So it's a good sign."

"Good sign of what?"

"Honey-pie," said Dusty, "I may have met a dame or two who was sexy without being ticklish. But never in my life have I ever met a dame who was ticklish without being sexy. You're ticklish."

"Don't you dare."

"Stop yapping," said Dusty. He stopped it by pressing his hand over her chin to make her mouth into an open rosebud which he proceeded to smother. His hand sought the tickle spot and caressed it. She wriggled against him, moved her lips until she could give him her open mouth, and then she slowly permitted every muscle of her body to relax one by one so long as its tension was not necessary to maintain physical contact with him.

As in a dreamlike slowness, she raised one hand to spread across the back of his head to hold his kiss; her other hand moved to slip the pearl buttons out of the starched uniform. The experienced hand unbolted the iron-maidenform, to give him free access.

Then abruptly she shook herself free. She stepped to the door and slipped a little latch, and on her return she peeled at every step. Dusty flipped the bedcover back as she returned to him, and when she slid in beside him he cradled her in his arms as she opened the cloture on his pajamas.

Dusty Britton, knowing that he had to be superior in all things if he were going to impress this superior people that he and his terrestrials were worthy of their existence, shot the works. Of one thing he was sure: that the colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady couldn't be told from one another at a time like this. This nurse he had in bed with him squealed just as loud after a pinch on the rump as any other tomato he'd ever pinched. Dusty set about to make her squeal louder.

He started with her lips and moved up across her face until he reached the hairline. He kissed her across the hairline and down each side over the ears and under the ears and across the throat and down. He kissed her breasts and nibbled gently until she moaned in ecstasy; until she was writhing beneath him in an instinctive cadence.

In the back of his mind was a little devil reminding him that if he could still figure things out at this point in the universal act, there was something missing. Dusty grinned mentally at the little devil. He remembered a script: *Dusty Britton on Iceworld* where the idiot writers had cooked up a life-form made of ice. There was a very pulchritudinous dame involved, but she was constructed of frozen water—ice.

By concentrating on trivia such as this, Dusty succeeded in synchronizing their emotional eruption. When the smoke cleared away, Dusty Britton had created a good press-agent for Terrestrial prowess.

She lay in the circle of his arm, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder. It would have been a choice moment for the sharing of a cigarette, but simple tobacco was not available. It would have been a better moment

for the sharing of the night of sleep which is its own emotional satisfaction.

She said, "Is it always this way on Earth?"

Dusty rubbed her forehead with his chin and didn't answer.

"We've got to get up."

Dusty grinned. "That statement is the same everywhere. Always it's the dame who says it's time to get up."

"And who says it's time to go to bed?"

"Wives," said Dusty, "only when their husbands have eyed a good-looking threat to fidelity."

"Are we all the same?"

"Honey-pie, if you were all the same, there wouldn't be any variety to give the spice to life."

"But we've still got to get up."

"Why?"

"Well, I shouldn't be here in the first place."

"That's not the point. Why should we get up?"

She squirmed against him. "Dusty?"

"Yes?"

"Better idea?"

"Uh-huh."

"Now?"

"Not exactly now."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Just to see what develops."

"You think something is going to?"

"I hope so."

"Good. Make it—quick Dusty?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Would you marry me?"

"Marry you?"

"Well, this was all sort of sudden, you know. I'm not—I wasn't prepared—"

Dusty leaned back on his pillow and chuckled. "Honey, the only thing that I can think of right now that is of any interest is whether the theological dogmas that object to birth control will object to the alliance be-

tween members of two planetary peoples who are not cross-fecund."

The nurse raised herself on one elbow, stared down into Dusty Britton's eyes and said: "Dusty, this may all be very new and interesting to you, but Gant Nerley will tell you that we all came from the same stock, and really, Dusty, I'm not as safe as laying an animated rubber doll."

"I'm not worried. Have you had enough or do you want to try it again?"

"Dusty, do you have the stamina?"

"I," said Dusty, "am Dusty Britton of the Space Patrol."

"Oh, stop bragging," said the nurse, "or I'll put my uniform on and pull rank on you."

"You mean put up or shut up?"

"Yes."

"I accept your offer."

Dusty rolled the girl in his arms, caressing her and taking a deep emotional enjoyment out of the effect his petting produced in her. She was wax in his hands, pliable and sweet. But Dusty had little response for an animated rubber doll. He wanted fire or ice, not simple lukewarm compliance. Contest was not a necessity, but cooperation was a minimum requirement. Rolling this nurse in the hay was just a task. It was fun, but so far as Dusty Britton was concerned, it was pretty pale fun compared to Barbara Crandall, who would not put up with anything less than an all-out best-of-effort.

Dusty closed his eyes and did his best to imagine that it was Barbara. Something deep in his subconscious took a fiendish delight in rubbing the little nurse's throat sandpaper-raw with his two-day beard stubble. Woman-like, she responded to this abuse by giving Dusty more than he expected of her. Neither of them arose unsatisfied. Still, Dusty knew that there was enough life in Barbara Crandall to have made it difficult to arise without complete satiation.

Oddly, he was at this moment more in love with Barbara than he had ever been before. And as their

years passed, he would surpass this depth time and time again, but he would never love her any less.

Dusty Britton was far more disturbed by his experience than his little nurse, who obviously took too much as a matter of course.

Dusty showered, shaved, and dressed in his cleaned uniform. When he got to the salon, Barbara Crandall was there already, also freshened and cleaned.

"So this," she said, "is Marandis."

The nurse nodded cheerfully. "You'll have to tell me how your Terra is; I've never been anywhere near that far from home, you know."

"Sure," said Dusty. "But now that we're on Marandis, what do we do next?"

"Oh. I'm to escort you to a formal meeting of the Bureau where you'll meet Gant Nerley face-to-face."

"How's Scyth Radnor?"

"Why, he's doing very well. He's hospitalized and he'll be out after the man who shot him, in about a week."

"He'd better take a month off for practise, first."

"Or," chuckled the nurse, "leave other men's women alone."

"Yes," agreed Barbara.

The nurse nodded. "You're very attractive," she said with no trace of jealousy or envy. "I can see Scyth getting sidetracked along your direction. I am a little disappointed in Scyth; it seems to me he could do better than a frauland for you."

"Better than a what?"

"Frauland—that bauble he gave you. You wouldn't know, of course, but it comes from Selira, a stellar colony not far from here. It's incredibly cheap."

Barbara tore the chain taking the bauble off. "Next time, I'll shoot Scyth Radnor myself!"

The nurse shuddered a bit, but Dusty merely laughed and said, "So now we know where we stand. And now knowing, I'm hungry."

"Of course. We'll all dine at the meeting."

"Oh?"

"Naturally. You're here, aren't you? Marandis is not going to send you back without a chance for you to present your case. There is a joint meeting of the Bureaus of Galactic Navigation and New Colonial Affairs. It will start with a formal breakfast, during which no business will be conducted. Then, once you are all acquainted with one another, the business of the day will be discussed and a decision rendered."

She led them to the spacelock and Dusty Britton had his first glimpse of a Marandanian spaceport. There was little to see, which made it even more stunning to the senses.

The size of the place was completely obscured by spacecraft, which stood like the trunks in a pine forest. Most of the craft were larger than Scyth Radnor's, and so obscured Dusty's vision. Between those nearby (which were rather wide-set) there were others at a short distance; beyond them there were still others; and behind those others were more and more and more, until all that could be seen were the tips of the up-thrust noses. The "horizon" was an irregular pattern of pointed shapes that was somewhat reminiscent of the Greek "Egg and Dart" moulding of ancient architecture.

Through some of the more distant lines of sight, the far spacecraft had a haze around them, as though they were miles and miles away.

There was not a building in sight, only the ships. Dusty gave up trying to see to the edge of the 'port and directed his attention to his nearby surroundings.

A road wound around the spacecraft in a zig-zag manner, meeting and dividing around each ship. There was an empty landing block not far from them, and after a bit of puzzled interest—the shape of the block aroused Dusty's curiosity—he decided that the landing block was hexagonal, as were all the rest of the landing blocks. They made a pattern, like the well-known hexagon tile floor; the road was the marker-lines between

the landing blocks. Those that were empty showed the effect of heavy masses parked on them—a bit of char now and then; a chip or a crack, probably the result of a rough landing; a deep seam repaired with some sort of cement or concrete (or whatever the Marandians had devised or discovered as a superior material) and at least one place where the edge had been chipped deeply, as though the pilot had missed his landing point and come down on the rim of the hexagonal block.

As they looked, a muted whirr attracted their attention and they turned to see a ship lowering itself out of the sky to come down in a slowing vertical drop that ended at the edge of a curtain of nearby spacecraft. The landing ship inserted itself in the pattern behind ships until only its nose was visible. Then to one side—and apparently with no warning, a ship nosed upward, gaining speed rapidly until it disappeared in the bright blue sky above.

The nurse said, "We land a ship every thirty seconds. There's a takeoff every thirty seconds, too."

"That is a lot of activity," said Britton. 7200 ships landing, a like number taking off, every hour—night and day. No wonder they had a huge spaceport!

"Marandis is the center of Galactic Culture, and this is only the spaceport that handles affairs of the Space Administration Department. Each of the many Departments of Galactic Government has its own spaceport. The one at the Department of Space Commerce is the largest, because that is the one that takes care of incoming transports that carry the necessities of living."

"Don't you do anything for yourself?"

"We have no room. Marandis is an urban planet. The only parts that are not built-up are preserves, parks, and recreation-forestry. There is nothing on the entire planet that does not serve Galactic Administration, in one manner or another."

Dusty nodded. He could grasp this, even though the magnitude was great. By simple proportion, if it took

one complete city to administer the government for a country, it should take one planet to administer the government of a galaxy. He wondered even then how they managed to get it all in.

He smiled and made a wave at the landing ramp; he had seen everything he could see from the little platform outside of the spacelock.

At the bottom, in the zig-zag road, was a lone, low-slung vehicle with a man in a simple uniform leaning indolently against the wheel. He was smoking a cigarette, which he tossed onto the landing block as they came down. He fired up the thing under the nose of the car after they were inside; as soon as the door slammed, he let the clutch out with a rasp, and the car jack-rabbited into motion. They took off from a standing start, like a frightened deer, at about five degrees lift; by the time Dusty and Barbara had pulled their heads forward from the jerked-back angle, the car was about thirty feet in the air and arrowing forward above the road. The speed climbed rapidly until Dusty estimated something near to a hundred miles per hour.

The driver was, of course, cutting the tips of the corners between the hexagonal blocks in a die-true line of flight, and paying no attention to the zig-zag road below them. Since the spacecraft were all standing in the center of their particular blocks, like chessmen on a tile floor, there was enough space between the ships themselves for such passage.

And now that they were in one of the aisles, buildings could be seen in the distance. The driver shot along this aisle with the self-assurance of any taxi-driver, hooting his horn now and then as they came to what seemed to be a major intersection of the zig-zag road below. Britton wondered what happened when two of these characters met in a draw; their man seemed to pay no attention to any other horn but his own.

Dusty was beginning to wonder about the need for any road below when his question was answered by the appearance of a caravan of heavy trucks.

The buildings at the end of the aisle between the spacecraft loomed larger. The driver whipped along at his thirty-foot altitude, making no attempt to climb over the buildings which were growing taller and more massive at a frightening rate. Dusty's palms went wet; the buildings had seemed minute when they turned into the aisle. Now they loomed ahead, and millions of windows could be seen; magnificent arches between the buildings spanned the gaps.

The air-cab whipped across an empty perimeter about the hexagonal-pattern of landing blocks, sped above a low building and into the tiny space between two buildings with an arch above and a roof below, and then went into a flat climb. The car rose slowly in the canyon between the buildings that lined the street below. There were people working in those buildings, men and women who sat at their desks behind windows and paid no attention to the passage of a hundred-mile-per-hour skycab within forty feet of them.

Now the car was above the roof-level, but it kept to the street-lanes. Below them, in the valley, was slow-moving traffic—ground cars, and air-cars that ran at different levels to avoid intersection-collisions. Up in the higher strata were the fast-moving air-cabs, each in its lane, and each lane for a different direction. Even with separate lanes the traffic was in turmoil.

To make a right turn, the driver jockeyed himself to the limit of the altitude allowed that line of traffic and, in the block before his turn, he rose above the lane, made his turn, and then entered the right-bound traffic pattern from below, mingling with the speeding aircabs. To make a left turn, the driver dropped to the floor of his lane, fell below, made his turn, and mingled with the left-bound turmoil from above their upper limit of altitude.

They raced along in the middle-altitude at high speed; cars above, below, to the left and right, and before and behind.

An aircar took off from the landing place a-top one

of the buildings, spiralled to its proper altitude, then whipped into the traffic. It was just in time to meet another aircar dropping out of the traffic lane to make a turn.

There was a rending crash of metal, and the immediate screech of a siren wailing in warning. The motion of traffic streamed aside; a third car slammed into the entangled pair, before traffic could divide to let the slowly spinning mess fall through. The three entangled cars separated, two-and-one, but a fourth plowed into the single car and they locked in a side-wise careen that bound up the whole mess again. A fifth barrelled dead-center into the falling mass with a violent crash and a flash of flame, as the crumpled mess caromed from the side of a building and fell down its flank. Windows shattered, and little tongues of fire licked along some of the sills.

The siren continued to wail, and from far behind there came another racketing crash as the wreck hit the street below.

"My God!" breathed Dusty, "New York at Rush Hour—In Three Dimensions!"

Their driver turned and winked at them. He flicked a lighter with one hand and lit the cigarette that was hanging from one corner of his mouth. "Yeah, some of those guys ought to take lessons."

Then he turned back to his job with a shrug, lost a hundred feet of altitude in three hundred feet of run, and fitted his aircab into a space between traffic that was just large enough to let him in without scratching paint. The other cars moved up, aside, down, or sped or slowed to give him elbow room. He fought them for position, dropping on a descending run through this cross traffic until he could whip out of traffic on a spiral over the rooftop of one of the buildings.

Here the driver phlegmatically put the aircab into a tight corkscrew that dropped them onto the roof. Dusty got out slowly, testing the stiffness of his knees after

the ride. He helped Barbara out next and the nurse came out on the other side at the same time.

Then they were almost roofed as the aircab took off on a flat, screaming 'U' turn that lofted him no more than ten feet, whipped across the street between levels, and swooped him down on the opposite side, where he hit the other roof with no bounce to come to a fast braking stop beside a man who had flagged him.

The man got in and the aircab whiffled off the roof in a crazy climbing turn and burrowed into the fast traffic lane above. It forced its way into the mass of traffic and was lost in a matter of seconds.

From a distance came the crunch of rending metal and the faint wail of a warning siren.

Barbara wiped her damp forehead with the back of a shaking hand. "Oh—for a film of this!"

"Nobody would believe it," said Dusty. "They'd call it a pipe dream."

"That mess? All that wrecked stuff?"

"Shucks, Barb. What's a fender for if you don't fend with it?"

The nurse nodded calmly. "That's the general idea," she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Dusty looked at her with great curiosity, but she was serious. She added, "I doubt that anybody suffered more than a nosebleed in that tangle."

"I'm told," said Dusty drily, "that corpses don't bleed."

"Our aircars are made to take it, and the passengers are well protected," explained the nurse.

Dusty said nothing. In the distance, there came the din of another fender-denting contest and the following wail of the warning siren, muted by the distance and covered by the rumble and roar of the metropolis. But their nurse paid no attention; she turned and led them to a roof kiosk and down some steps into an elevator.

The operator let them drop slightly slower than the free-fall constant of the planet Marandis, leaving their stomachs somewhere up on the hundred and ninety-first floor. He braked the elevator somewhere down below,

and their innards caught up with them in a sudden rush that buckled their knees.

They went along a magnificent corridor, through massive carved doors opened for them by men in uniform; then they were ushered into a vast room with a vaulted ceiling, tapestried walls, and a polished floor. Deep arm-chairs were waiting around a huge table that glistened with polished metal and blinding white cloth, the severity broken by the color of dish and fruit and fluid. Soft stringed music filled the air that was scented lightly.

As they entered, the music swelled from strings to full orchestra, and the scent changed from languid sweetness to a pungent aroma. The soft-key lighting swirled across the vaulted ceiling and changed into brilliant colors.

The music faded, and a vibrant voice announced: "Dusty Britton, Commander in Chief of The Junior Division of The Terran Space Patrol. Barbara Crandall, Thespian and Vocal Musician of Terra. In attendance, Lela Brandis, Mistress of Extra-Marandanian Medicine."

The music swelled again, the scent came heavy and sharp, and lights flashed like summer lightning, then came to rest outlining them brilliantly.

Gant Nerley crossed the huge room and held out his hand to Dusty. "We need no introduction, Dusty Britton," he said in a ringing tone. "I say 'Greeting' to you with all my heart!"

Another stab of music, a touch of cinnamon-scent, and a play of lights.

Gant Nerley turned. "Stop the dramatics," he commanded. "Are we children, to be impressed by theatrical tricks?"

The music shifted back to the string ensemble, the scent smoothed out to something pleasant and pungent, and the lights faded back to their neutral medium-key. Dusty thought that if this was strictly ad-lib, someone was a past master at the art of extemporaneous composition. He liked it. And if it took Marandanian children

to appreciate it, you could give him ten years in school and call him the Marandanian Child.

Gant Nerley was holding out an elbow to Barbara. She took it and the Marandanian led her toward the head of the table. Dusty looked around; then he offered his own elbow to the nurse—Mistress of Extra-Marandanian Medicine, Lela Brandis.

It was many years before Dusty identified the things he had for breakfast. It was exotic and well-prepared; none of it was remotely familiar but all of it was good.

Then over ceremonial drinks and smokes, Gant Nerley rose, rapped the table with his knuckles, and proposed the problem for the day.

CHAPTER XVII

"What are we going to do about Sol?" asked Gant Nerley seriously.

Dusty Britton eyed the Marandanian soberly. "Leave it alone, I hope."

"You realize what you are asking?"

"Do we have to go through all that again?"

"Again?"

Dusty slammed the table with his fist hard enough to make the glassware jump. "Again and again. I'm getting sick and tired of explaining all the many reasons why none of us want to move to another star and lose a thousand years. And then being told that, after all, it won't hurt, and besides this move is necessary, and either we move willingly or we'll be moved anyway."

"Why are you so angry?"

Britton looked at Gant Nerley and sat down wearily. "Because all of us know that you're going to go on and do it, anyway—but not until you've forced yourself

to believe that you have convinced us that we should accept this kick in the pants gracefully."

"It isn't that simple."

"No?"

"No, it isn't. You see, we are bound by our own laws to hold to certain programs under certain conditions. It is the conditions that prevail which we are attempting to define, outline, determine, and pin down so that we know what lawful action may be taken."

"You sound like a bureaucrat explaining away an awkward situation. Just what do you mean by conditions and programs?"

"There are the following. First would be a race—remember in all of these I am talking about the races of mankind strewn across the galaxy. These races stem from a single source, the origin of which is lost in the antiquity of a hundred thousand years—So, first would be a race which was still in the growing-up stage—say the mound building, early agricultural or perhaps later, in early metal. It is an age of no true grasp of science. What little of science is known has come from guesswork, blundering discovery, and hit-or-miss experiment. Such a race could be moved across space without harm, because the change would only bring about superstitious horror and religious fear. A few hundred years the astronomers would be rising and stating flatly that no agency in the universe could change the Constant Stars. The old sky would be wiped out of men's memory in a couple of generations, although it might remain in myth and fairy tale for a long time. Such a set of conditions would permit the moving program without a qualm."

Gant Nerley looked at Britton. "Understand?"

"Sure," replied Dusty. "Go on."

"Then on the other end of the scale we have the advanced race. These people have discovered the phanobands, know about space flight and perhaps have colonized the planets of other stars say within ten to fifty light years. A race of this stage of development would

understand and grasp the problem quickly. Then having been shown the problem, they would make the move willingly because they would understand that their destiny is a part of the Galactic Destiny."

"You mean to say that if Marandis, itself, were found to lie across the road like a stone wall you would all happily toss your own planet into a barytrine field for a thousand years?"

Gant smiled serenely. "Well, doubt it as you will, but we would. Of course, we know that no such case would ever come up. But if it did . . ."

"Y'know what you remind me of," snapped Dusty. "You remind me of a parent explaining to his kid that this castor oil is good for the kid, and that if the parent himself needed it, he would take it with a happy smile—excepting of course that the parent does not need anything of that nature. We have an old adage: He dies well who never faced a sword! I think it applies here. Well, go on, Gant. Tell me where Terra lies in your scale of values."

"That's what we are trying to determine. You are obviously not of the pre-aware stage. You have your limited space travel, and your historical records, which will preclude any attempt at forcing the affair upon you and leading you to consider former conditions as legend."

"Thanks."

"On the other hand, you are not at the advanced stage where you could accept a change in your night sky without trouble, nor will you accept it willingly."

"How true. Now this brings us to the impasse, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

From across the table a man waved for attention. "It's more than that. At the time Dusty Britton opened the distress phanoband, the secret of the galactic rift was let out. Like everybody else, we put direction finding equipment on the signal and have it located rather well. Then we went back through our files and find that, as far as we can tell, Sol was mentioned as a possible

beacon by one of our early exploratory parties. One that disappeared. One that—"

"So what?" asked a man down the table from Dusty. "Seems to me that Intercluster sits on its duff and waits for us to find rifts for them."

"Transgalactic isn't the only outfit with a spacecraft," stated the man from Intercluster angrily. "We've done our share."

"Not on my books," replied the Transgalactic representative.

Intercluster eyed Transgalactic sourly. "What's the matter? Are you angry because Intercluster happens to have records on the rift you re-discovered?"

"Re-discovered my—"

Intercluster turned to Gant Nerley. "I leave it up to you," he said. "Our records show that we, too, have rights to this rift."

Transgalactic hammered on the table. "If you have rights, why aren't you using them?"

"Because you and your gang concealed them from us until Scyth Radnor got into trouble. A fine bunch of incompetents you are. A fine group to be representatives of our culture. You can't even keep your hands off of native females . . ."

Barbara Crandall arose and turned with a single flowing motion that hurled the contents of her highball glass into Intercluster's face. The man staggered, floundered backward into his chair, then went over in a crash.

"Native Female?" she snapped.

The room became silent; music stopped on a flubbed note, scent soured in a brief wave, as though the man on the valves had been startled hard enough to miscue. The lights flickered briefly.

Barbara stood there, tense and lithe. "Native female am I?" she breathed. "Ignorant, impressable, hardly fit to sit in the company of the highly civilized intellect."

Dusty rose and pushed her down into her chair with a hand on her shoulder. Then he went over and picked

the Intercluster man up from the floor by grabbing the man's shirtfront and lifting.

"We're a rough and ready race," he said. "We're hard, and fast, and a bit short-tempered. I came unarmed." He pointed to the band across his hips where the Dusty Britton Blaster belt had protected the whipcord cloth from the sun. "I did so because I wanted this settled in peace. And maybe because I happen to be tough enough to wipe up the nearest boulevard intersection with any three of you. Would you like to try for four?"

Dusty hurled the representative into a back corner, where an attendant straightened him out and stood him up and started brushing him off. Dusty turned his back on them and went over to the Transgalactic man and faced him with outjutting jaw about three inches from the man's nose.

"As for you," gritted Dusty, "you have the unmitigated nerve to sit there like Caesar, and discuss who has the right to use the rift through space, without a thought about what we stand to lose while you build your Galactic highway. I ought to pick you up and hit him with you."

The man backed away nervously as Britton's eyes glittered. Dusty let the man retreat, then he turned his back on the man from Transgalactic and strode over to Cant Nerley.

"This is justice?" he demanded. "What do we get in repayment? A dozen strings of fraulands and a bottle of trade gin?"

Transgalactic said, "You can't behave that way here . . ."

Dusty turned slowly, and it dawned on him what he was doing, and how he had been getting away with all this.

He knew, suddenly, that he was really Dusty Britton of The Terran Space Patrol, and as phony as the space patrol, but just as good as the best of them. He was an actor. He had done as good (if not better) a job of holding his own than the finest of scientists or statesmen or businessmen could have done. Because he

was an actor, Dusty Britton had succeeded in convincing these people that the cultural level of Earth was higher than it was. A scientist would have admitted his limitations, because that was the way scientists operate. A businessman would have been baffled, and a statesman would have tried to cover his indecision in a gout of flowery language which would be recognized for what it was.

Dusty was an actor, blunt and not too smart. Modesty is not part of an actor, while the ability to submerge himself is. He had become Dusty Britton of The Space Patrol, hero of a hundred adventures in space among a people who were hard and fast because they were still in the struggle against their environment. He had them all convinced that he and his friends spent their time racing around in dangerous, imperfect spacecraft powered by reaction motors.

He was Dusty Britton, who had shot Scyth Radnor for making passes at his woman. He had taken the controls of a completely foreign spacecraft and had driven the ship half way across the galaxy. That Gant Nerley, and a corps of engineers, and a bank of computing machines, had supervised his every motion did not detract from the feat in their eyes.

He sauntered over to Nerley and said, "Well?"

Gant Nerley was impressed with Dusty's self-confidence. So were the rest of the men in the room, with the exception of the representatives of the two shipping companies. Nerley looked around from face to face and then said, in an official tone: "It would appear that Terra is of a level of development that mitigates against immediate action. Therefore we shall declare a recess, during which time we shall study the Terran people. If Terra measures up, other steps must be taken."

There was a chorus of "Aye!", the sound of chairs being pushed back, and the noise of feet on the floor as the men began to file out. A babble of voices arose as the members broke into little groups and began discussing the problem, as they passed out of the vast hall.

But Dusty did not hear them. The self-confidence had oozed out of him. He slumped into his chair and was staring at the table silver, trying to think of something other than the horrible certainty. For while Dusty Britton had bluffed the Marandians, he knew that his bluff was being called. It would not stand up. All it would take was the Marandian Investigating Committee scouring Terra, looking for one single man who had any reason to believe that matter could exceed the velocity of light. Oh, there were such people. But the man who professed such opinions was the man who had faith, but no proof.

Without doubt the report of any such committee would recommend that Terra be bundled into its barytrine field at once, and that Sol be made into the three-day variable needed for the beacon on this particular dogleg of the journey across the galaxy.

Dusty had succeeded in his own way, but now he knew that this was not enough. He, himself, had convinced Marandis that Terra was worthy of notice; but the rest of Terra would let him down. Still lost in his own thoughts, he became aware that one man was raising his voice to get an audience.

It was the Transgalactic representative. He was standing by his place at the table, talking in the tone of voice used by a professional lecturer hammering home an unpleasant fact:

“. . . obvious by the animal ferocity of this Terran, his threats and his willingness to plunge into physical combat, that he and his kind cannot be of high culture. I am asked whether we may judge an entire race of people by one man, and I agree that we cannot. But then, view the reaction of his companion who flares up in a fit of anger, taking offense at being properly cataloged. I ask you gentlemen, is there any excuse for this? Am I not a native male of Marandis? Is she not a native female of Terra?

“And so by their actions, both violent in nature and unpredictable in direction, they have shown themselves

to be uncouth. Who knows what offense they will take next? Does a man among us dare to speak freely with either man or woman of Terra alone and unprotected? No, because no one can ever know beforehand what peculiarity of their own limited semantics will be rubbed the wrong way, setting them into a violent fury. Dusty Britton has boasted that he can take any of us out and wipe up the street with us. This cannot be denied, but what does it prove? Only that his shoulders are broad and his back strong and his fists hard. And that he has been trained in violence.

"Now, gentlemen, consider this next argument: What has Terra to lose? No more than a familiar night sky, really. The time under the barytrine field will pass without their notice. As for the time lost in respect to the rest of the galaxy, since they have had no contact with it, they cannot be affected by the loss. They prate about losing a thousand years of advancement. Consider how soon they would be taking to space if we had not found them. Might it not be yet a thousand years before contact with the galaxy took place? Yet as it stands now, this man and this woman will live to see galactic commerce, whereas they would be dead and gone without ever knowing of the galaxy if Marandis had not found them. And having been granted that, they still have the ignorant rebellion of children.

"They have not the foresight to understand that so far as they are concerned, less than a week of their time will pass before the ships and men of Marandis will land on Terra in its new surroundings, to treat with them, to lead them, to educate them, to bring to Terra all of the glories and benefits of galactic civilization—Nay, gentlemen, *to return to Terra its galactic heritage, lost so long ago. Its birthright returned!*

"And yet what response do we get? Objection, rebellion, and threat of violence. So I ask you, are we to be frightened by this small primitive world that lies like a barrier across our path? Are we to be cowed by a show of force? Are we? And if we are, shall we run in

fear from a race of men who bear missile-propelling weapons?

"Look at Dusty Britton and his companion. They sit there angry, possibly planning their own form of revenge to take place if we have the temerity to proceed. Then let me ask you, supposing they do object? Suppose they do resent our meddling in their small lives? Are we to be frightened of bomb and gun—we who can put them back into their barytrine field and keep them there until they are willing to agree? *And without the loss of a single life?* Gentlemen, this whole meeting reminds me far too much of parents who try to argue logically with children over bedtime, instead of packing the infants off. Who knows what is best? Child or parent?"

The man from Transgalactic paused a moment to let this sink in. Then he said, "Gant Nerley, I object to your proposal. We need no more investigation. We know now what these Terrans are and how they react. They offer little to Marandis at present, they are no more than a responsibility to us and as such they owe us our superior rights. Therefore, unless I am ordered at this moment to cease and desist, I am going to proceed. Do I hear such an order?"

A babble of voices rose.

"Gentlemen," said Transgalactic, suavely, "I offer you a short and quick route to the Spiral Cluster."

He stood there for fully a minute, listening to the clamor of individual discussions going on in the smaller groups around the table. Then he hit the table with his fist, bowed sardonically to Dusty and Barbara, and strode out.

Dusty looked at Gant Nerley. "Can't we do something about this? Can he go and do as he pleases?"

Gant Nerley shrugged. "We are a government which guides but does not rule, suggests but does not demand, recommends but does not force. I can and will put a stop to his activity, providing that you show direct evidence that Terra and Sol are of importance in their present location, that Terra has something to offer Mar-

andis, that you are not what he claims. However, if what he said is true, then what he is about to do is acceptable."

"But we . . ." Dusty stopped short. He had no argument strong enough to convince this Marandanian that Terra would lose anything but its own prestige.

Dusty stood up slowly. "Come on, Barbara, let's go home. At least we can be among friends. I'd hate to be marooned here while Terra was smothered in the barytrine field."

Barbara stood up and leaned against his side. "Yes, Dusty," she said in a throaty contralto.

Gant smiled wanly. "I'll see that you get home. Forgive us, Dusty. You'll really lose little and gain much. I . . ."

Dusty looked at Nerley. Then he looked down at Barbara. Then up at Gant again.

"So I've failed," he said in a low voice. "I've tried and failed. And I am aware of the fact that Terra will not lose much. That isn't the point. It's just that I, Dusty Britton, am a personal failure. I should like to be able to say that I don't care what other people think, but I cannot. I care a lot what other people think. Because for the next forty or fifty years or more, I have a living to make, and making a living is a lot easier if the entire world is not convinced that I am a nogoodnik. But then, who am I to stand in the way of galactic progress."

"Dusty, I regret that the rest of your people will not be able to see what I am going to show you. Maybe you can describe it when you return. Come with me."

CHAPTER XVIII

Gant Nerley led them from the hall, along a corridor that ended in an elevator bank where they whooshed up and up, then to a moving walk that hurled them out and across one of the flamboyant arches between buildings. Here Gant stopped to display his credentials to a man in uniform, and to sign a register that also listed Dusty and Barbara and their home planet Terra.

Then, along a corridor that curved gently; through a heavy metal door that opened on response to a signal sequence delivered against a button.

The room inside was vast, truly vast. It was a vertical cylinder and it must have been more than a thousand feet in diameter and three or four hundred feet tall. They stood inside of the door on a narrow metal catwalk that ran completely around the circle, its far side lost in distance and dimness; the room was not illuminated from above, but from below.

It was a pleasant glow, a flat hazy, wispy glow from a gas-like cloud that floated in the room a hundred feet below the catwalk.

A scale model of the galaxy.

It looked like any photograph of one of the galaxies taken through a telescope, except that this model was dotted here and there with winking pinpoints. It was also stringed through and through with thin lines that glowed in many colors—some solid colors and some in a two-color spiral like coded wire cable. Here and there were faintly glowing spherical volumes containing many stars, or rectangular volumes confined by planes of faint color-glow. Certain of these clusters were linked with

other clusters by the zigzag lines that wound and interwove around and through in a tangled skein.

Gant Nerley picked up a small cylinder from a rack on the railing of the catwalk. A narrow pencil of light pointed out and he aimed it towards the center, some five hundred feet out to the middle of the hall. "Marandis," he said. Then he brought the pointer-light across towards them slowly, to stop a hundred feet from their position. "Sol," he said. "The lines are courses surveyed and registered by the various companies. The colored stars are our inhabited systems, and the volumes register certain clusters. The faint greenish-yellow course that ends out there by Sol is the Transgalactic course set up to reach from Marandis to the Spiral Cluster which lies almost at our feet."

The magnificence of the spectacle was enhanced by the silence in the room. The galaxy, it seemed, lay at their feet. In a hushed voice, Dusty asked, "Is this where they survey the courses? Couldn't they figure out a way around Sol?"

Gant laughed sympathetically. "Look at it and think, Dusty Britton."

Dusty and Barbara looked, both in awed silence as Gant Nerley went on:

"In that model, which looks like a wisp of gas, there are fifteen billion individual pinpoints. Think, Dusty. One-five, comma, zero zero zero, comma, zero zero zero, comma, zero zero zero stars in one galaxy. Across the breadth of this room it lies, scaled down to represent the hundred thousand light years of its diameter at the rate of a hundred light years at the foot. Eight and one third light years per inch, Dusty Britton, so your Sol and your Sirius lie about an inch apart. Now, in order to make the stars visible, they must be above a certain intrinsic size, and in the size of the stars the scale of the model is violated. Each tiny glowing point is about one sixteenth of an inch in diameter. That makes the scalar size of the stars about a half light year in diameter. The diameter of the colored lines which represent courses

is of the same magnitude, so as we go into the model—as we may—we will find that the courses touch, intersect, and lie tangent to stars that are actually far from the line of flight in real space.

“What I am saying, of course, is only a new concept of something that you already know, but pertaining to another subject with which you have every right to be more familiar. Take a globe of your Terra. It is excellent for locating areas, finding cities, lakes, oceans, mountain ranges—anything gross enough to find physical size upon the map. But you cannot use it for a road map to direct you to the home of a friend, because the details of such a trip are much too fine. So we use this model for large-scale mapping, but could not possibly use it for the delicate business of course mapping.”

“But if you enlarged a section . . . ?”

Gant Nerley nodded. “It has been tried. No good. You see, Dusty, this was made by going deep into space and making stereograms from all angles. The transparencies are used in projectors all around the hall. But as you may know, the finest photogram loses definition when it is enlarged too much. As for delicate operations, just to prove our point, we are going to enter the model because we want to find the place where the unlicensed barytrine field has been detected.”

Nerley led them to a control panel in the railing, and from the sheet of paper in his hand he set the dials.

The vast circular runway lowered all around the hall and the galaxy-model rose, giving the appearance of turning upward past them. “We are coming down toward and below the plane of our galaxy at the scalar rate of about a hundred thousand light years per minute.” Then a segment of the catwalk detached from the wall and went forward on a long girder.

The bright pinpoints leaped out at them, giving Dusty the same feeling as he had had in the space flight, except that the model lacked the waves of heat as the little pinpoints passed. He looked at Barbara and watched the tiny points plunge into her face to disappear, then

reappear behind her, as if they passed through her body harmlessly. He looked at his hand as the points streamed through; he waggled his fingers around a cluster and watched them twinkle.

They penetrated clusters and dark-cloud areas, places where fifty stars occupied a volume of less than a couple of cubic inches, spots where dusky, shapeless masses represented globs of fifty light years in diameter. Dusty caught on, thoughtfully; he looked at Barbara and made a rough computation that he and she were a couple of thousand light years apart. His eyes, he thought, must be about thirty light years apart; and the diameter of his head, at eight and a third light years per inch . . .

Dusty Britton began to feel light-headed.

Through and through the model ran the colored lines, tangled and skeined and then they were facing the point where the greenish-yellow course-line ended.

"Sol?" asked Gant in a hushed voice.

Dusty shrugged. "Sol? How can we—"

He leaned forward, set his right eye close to the pinpoint of light, and looked outward. Was it—could it be—familiar? He changed his angle of sight. Was Galactic North aligned with Terrestrial North? Dusty could not remember. The center of the Galaxy? Somewhere in or near Saggitarius, he believed, but Dusty was not familiar with the constellation. There! Was that the Belt of Orion? It looked strange, distorted. The constellation as he remembered it of old, was not like that.

Pinpoints, of course, could not begin to look like these tiny discs, or vice versa. Was it this that made them seem unfamiliar or was it that he was displaced in scalar space by enough light years to distort the constellation? Was that—there—Polaris and the Dipper, large and small, and Andromeda? Or was that 'W' shaped thing Cassiopea? He wished that he had paid more attention to astronomy.

Pleiades? He shook his head. That was a cluster and unless one remembered the configuration as it looked from Sol, the conglomeration of stars would probably look

about the same at the same number of light years from the opposite side.

Sol—if that glow was Sol—must be near bright Sirius. If that bright one was Sirius, it was a single blob because Sirius & Companion were quite lost in the half-light-year diameter of the glowing spot that represented the system. And so, of course, was Centauri. No, one could not scale a hundred thousand light years down to a thousand feet and hope to retain enough detail to calculate a course. Dusty nodded unhappily. He looked along the green-yellow line that ended at Sol and realized that at least one place in the course there was a change of direction so shallow that the ship only traversed space from one side of the line to the other, changed course, and returned to the first side.

He straightened up with a furrow in his brow. "Where does the course lead from Sol?"

"The prospectus, of course, is not shown as finished," said Gant. "But we can show it momentarily." He pressed a button and a dotted line of yellow-green flashed into view, extending from the end of the solid line out and out until it was lost to their view through the star field towards the outward Spiral Cluster.

Dusty looked at the line. "I suppose it isn't to scale or anything," he said. "But I can't help hoping—Gant, look, suppose this model were truly to scale, couldn't they save themselves a beacon here?"

"Save a beacon?"

Dusty nodded and the little speckles blinked at his eyes. "I'm just thinking that if you can move a planet away from a star you want to convert into a three-day variable, you might be able to take your barytrine field and slap it around this star here." Dusty pointed to one with a forefinger. "Then you move it aside, and that gives you a long run from this beacon to that beacon—missing Sol by a full inch—er—eight and a third light years."

Gant blinked. Slowly, he said, "Move the star . . ." and let his voice trail away into a mutter. "Move the interfering star . . ." he repeated again. "Then . . . My God!"

"What's the matter?"

"Yours is the glimmer of an idea that makes for the birth of a new concept!" breathed Nerley. "Take it from there, Dusty. Don't you see? Move a star, and straighten out one dogleg. Move two, and iron out the course even more. Maybe we could drill a free channel completely through from Marandis to the Spiral Cluster. Maybe from Marandis to Star's End, to Vannevarre, to Rescrustes, perhaps from Laranonne to Ultimane across the whole galaxy, a hundred thousand light years of free flight without a change in course. I . . ."

A tiny spot of light came crawling along the yellow-green course to disappear into the tiny pinpoint of light that represented Sol.

Gant said, "That must have been Transgalactic, returning to Sol to . . ." Then he jumped. "Dusty! Come on! There's no time to waste!"

"Can we catch 'em?" cried Barbara.

"We've got to!" snapped Gant Nerley.

Dusty Britton eyed the model of the Galaxy. He pointed solemnly. "Get your posse," he said. "We'll take this shortcut through Orion—and cut 'em off below Orion's Belt."

CHAPTER XIX

Dusty Britton expected that there would be quite a difference between his own handling of Marandianian spacecraft and the professional's. But he did not realize how great this difference was. In a larger ship than Scyth Radnor's, spearheading a conical flight of twelve more ships, he rode behind the pilot and admired the smoothness of the man's operation.

The color of the plate was high in the blue-violet and the stars leaped out of their background to whip past

with hardly a flick. Beacons fairly buzzed and they grew into flaming balls and were gone behind as the pilot moved the 'Tee' bar with a deft motion of one hand and used the other hand to flick back and forth across the controls, changing the viewpanel coordinates and adjusting the various factors for flight. He skirted gas-fields dangerously close and zipped between the cluster by the double zigzag with a swaying motion, then humped the spacer down tight and made a dead run for it.

And behind him in a cone came the rest, in tight formation, conically arranged below the leader in tiers, three, four, five.

They soared around another beacon, its flashing fire bright blue and the coronal glow reaching out for them; then the pilot was calling out numbers, and a man at the computer was punching keys. On the viewpanel before them lay another beacon, winking, winking, winking.

Behind them, a continuous tape was running through the recording machine, playing its words on the phanoband communication channels: "Calling Transgalactic! Government Priority and Emergency! Calling Transgalactic! You are to disable your barytrine generator, you are to discontinue all operations at once! By Order of the Bureau Of Galactic Affairs!"

A man sat tense in his chair peering at a greenish screen that had a halo-spot in the middle. The halo was growing larger, but so slow as to be almost steady. The man held a micrometer thimble between his thumb and forefinger and was turning it slowly, keeping a pair of dark lines tangent to the bright edge of the halo. From time to time he would call out a figure which another man would pluck out on a keyboard.

"Why don't they answer?" breathed Barbara.

Gant Nerley frowned. "Because they are going to go through with it if they can."

"But . . . ?"

"They have every legal right to maintain communication silence, even though at the present time there is

small point in maintaining secrecy about this rift. Their legal position is one of fair safety. One cannot be convicted of disobeying orders that one does not hear."

"You mean to say they can't hear that signal?"

"Of course they hear it. But can you prove that they hear it?"

"On Terra, we have a saying that Ignorance of the Law is no defense. This is to keep people from shooting people, and then claiming that they didn't know that shooting people is unlawful."

"Very sensible. We have the same laws and the same interpretation," said Gant. "But in this case we have a different situation. As of the last acknowledged contact with Transgalactic, and specifically that part which is dealing with Sol and Terra, they had every right to proceed. The law has been changed. Now it is up to the administrators to see that the information has been properly delivered to the interested parties, and that the change is acknowledged. Follow?"

Dusty nodded. "*Ex post facto* sort of thing. If you pass a law on Tuesday, forbidding neckties, you cannot arrest a man for having worn one on Monday."

"Right."

"But this is already Tuesday."

"But to be effective, newly passed laws must be properly posted. A-space they must be acknowledged. And Transgalactic is playing communication-silence."

"And that was the character who yelped about our vengeful nature? Isn't he guilty of the same?"

Gant Nerley nodded. "Of course! Aren't we all human?"

The phanoband signal went on: "Calling Transgalactic! Discontinue all operations by Order of . . ." and so forth.

The squawk box on the wall said, "Calling Gant Nerley with report."

"Report!"

"Report slight increase in phanoradiation high in the subnuclear region. Cross semi-collateral traces indicating an increase in lower-level nuclear activity."

The squawk box clicked off and Dusty looked at Gant Nerley. "What was all that?"

"He means that Transgalactic is hard at work. The lower level of nuclear reactions has increased in intensity, meaning in simple prediction that the business of making a variable star out of Sol is under way."

The Marandanian with the filar micrometer on the barytrine detector grumbled. "It's going to be a bit rough."

"Why?" asked the pilot. "If it weren't for that barytrine, we'd never find Sol. We'd be canvassing the stellar region around there for weeks if we didn't have a focal point."

"I know," grunted the detector-operator. "First you need a barytrine field large enough to make a homing run on, but then once you're home you'll want a tiny one so you can locate the generator precisely. Well, you can't have 'em both, Jann."

Jann Wilkor shook his head. "I wish I'd made this run before. I could make it faster."

Nerley pointed at the screen and nudged Dusty Britton. The color-scale was still high in the blue-violet, and there were a couple of places on the viewpanel that were a dead black—tiny spots that did not move as Jann Wilkor's delicate touch corrected the course. Spots burned out of the substance of the panel like overexposed film burned through.

"It takes a master pilot to make a run this fast. Even so, we're taking a rather high risk. But if the channel was free and open from Marandis to Spiral Cluster, with only a big phanobeacon at either end, we could make it with the screen burning black-violet. We may even have to develop a new supraradiant material for ultrahigh velocities."

"How fast can you go?"

Jann Wilkor soared around a beacon and centered on the next before the flicking wave of heat was gone. He did it easily and with the reflex of the master pilot. "Fitt Mazorn took one of the high-speed jobs into intergalactic space for a speed run about a year ago. He claims to have made it from Laranonne to Ultimane

in slightly less than an hour. Or," corrected the pilot, "an equivalent distance, out in deep-deep space. Some of this is probably guff. I doubt that he could do it. That's a hundred thousand light years per hour, and just a bit fantastic. Trouble is that the phanobands propagate at a finite speed, according to Hahn Tratter, and therefore the true velocity is difficult to check, since no one has been able to measure phanoband velocity."

"At any rate, it's fast," agreed Dusty, who did not understand half of what the pilot said.

Gant nodded. "It's fast. It's what we'll be doing in your clear channels, Dusty. That will make you rich and famous, that idea of yours."

"Providing we can get there in time."

"No matter. If Terra is lost to you, you'll still . . ."

"Look," said Dusty, "if that bunch wins out, I'll . . ."

"And I won't blame you," replied Nerley.

There came a double report. The man on the barytrine detector said, "Field is in the second phase," at the same time that the pilot rounded a beacon and set his sight on a non-winking star, saying: "Last lap!"

"Our next problem is to scour Terra for their barytrine generator," said Gant worriedly.

Dusty groaned. He thought of the trackless wastes of the planet—the Upper Amazon jungles; the tundra of Canada and Siberia; the hidden reaches of Africa; high Tibet, and for that matter, the cornfields of Iowa and the wheatfields of Saskatchewan. The fathomless, staggering area of the sea was too vast a search-problem to contemplate.

Gant looked at Dusty. "It's bad, Dusty. I'll not deceive you, it's really bad. Perhaps we have a day or two, but no more. We're just late enough so that Phase Two of the barytrine field will have grown to the point where the leakage-reaction in our detector will render directional detection completely impossible. The detector will be completely overloaded. We must count on other help."

"Meaning what?" asked Dusty.

"Just what I said before. We must comb your planet inch by inch."

Dusty tried to think, but all that came to his mind was a ringing line from "Dusty Britton And The Thionite Runners." Helmuth, the vicious villain and head of Boskonian, suspected Dusty's presence and bade his evil minions: "Comb Trengo, inch by inch!"

He shook his head clear and said, "Look, Gant, you don't know what you're asking. I can't possibly set up a land-scouring search that will cover Earth. I haven't much more than the foggiest notion of how many billion square miles of open country there are, let alone the inaccessible jungles and mountainous regions. To say nothing of the sea bottoms that cover almost seven tenths of Earth. We couldn't even touch most of the planet, and I have no doubt that the thing will be very well hidden, indeed."

Gant shook his head. "They'd hardly go to any great trouble."

"No? You forget that they're planning on keeping this thing hidden for a thousand years."

Nerley shook his head with a sympathetic smile. "You forget, Dusty Britton, that insofar as any human on this planet is concerned, the time between right now and one thousand years from now is only one or two of your days. Once the field snaps on completely, the time elapsed within it will be zero, so far as any observer on Earth will know. The chances are very high that they've dropped onto some place with a comfortable climate—perhaps near a big city just as Scyth Radnor did."

"For the same purpose?"

"Possibly," admitted Gant. "After all . . ." He let the subject drop with the silent suggestion that Dusty himself would think of the same thing and then act upon it. "So now you must issue orders to your Space Patrol."

Dusty winced. *His* Space Patrol? Discredited, his position shot to bits, his public appeal running close to absolute zero, who would listen to him? His former admirers

had discarded their Space Patrol uniforms for the costume of Jack Vandal, Space Rover.

Then Dusty blinked and sat up with a puzzled smile. Gant asked, "You have an idea?"

"I hope so."

"And . . . ?"

Dusty smiled thoughtfully, wistfully. "From the moment Scyth Radnor opened his spacelock and burned the end off my antenna with that raygun of his, I've been fighting a losing game. I've been outpointed, overbid, doubled and set. About the only reason I'm still fighting is that some of the cockeyed rules seem to play into my hands—just enough to make it look as if I might have a chance every now and then. Just enough to keep me coming back for more. Yes, confound it, I've got an idea. Can I call the orders, Gant?"

"It seems only fitting that a Commander of the Junior Division should take full command of our forces."

Dusty looked at him sharply, but the Marandanian's expression was calm and, if anything, deeply interested. Not scornful.

Dusty turned to the pilot. "When we finally arrive," he said, "circle the planet several times as fast and as low as you can. Create a stir. Radiate like mad with anything harmless that you can radiate. In other words, make an ostentatious display of the fact that this fleet is powerful, important, and has something to say."

"Right," said the pilot and began to call orders to the other spacecraft.

Britton asked Gant Nerley, "May I have one of those fountain-pen sized blasters that Scyth Radnor tried to do me in with?"

Gant eyed the un-bleached stripe across Dusty's hip. "I'll get you a full sidearm," he promised with a worried look.

"Oh," said Dusty airily, "I don't intend to use it. It's just that—well, you see, I'm not in uniform."

"I see." At Gant's direction a blaster was brought and Dusty buckled it on. He did not think he would

have to use it, but if some irate people did not pause to listen to him once he hit ground, he could at least draw a smoking line across the earth, as a demonstration that he was right, and then dare anybody to poke a toe across the line.

"Second," he said. "Have you anything as primitive as a radio transmitter aboard?"

"You mean a radiomagnetic communicating device? Well, not for real communicating, but we do have one rigged up with a menslator for scanning likely planets for possible life of intelligent but semiprimitive culture."

"Good."

"Unfortunately, it's only a receiver."

"Oh," groaned Dusty.

One of Nerley's crew spoke up. "If you don't need much radiomagnetic power, we've a piece of test equipment that might serve."

"How much power?" asked Dusty suspiciously. Test equipment was not, even to his limited knowledge, very likely to be big and husky.

"Fairly weak. Probably won't develop much more than eight or nine thousand megawatts."

Dusty swallowed. "Rig it up," he said in a voice that concealed his feelings. The big broadcast stations developed fifty kilowatts. A few thousand megawatts would serve him very well. His spirits began to rise again.

The screech of air came first as a thin whistle. Then it keened high above the audible, and changed from a howl into frightful thunder-claps as the thirteen Marandanian spacecraft roared across the face of Earth at an altitude of no more than fifteen hundred feet—at five times the speed of sound. Windows were shattered in Russia and in China, then in Hawaii and in California. The central plains of America shocked to it, and the skyscrapers of New York shivered as the fleet passed above.

Briton and Frenchman, Pole and Indian and Malayan cringed at the thunder from above; and Indonesian, Argentinian and South African, Australian and Mexican

and Floridan picked himself up from floor or ground and, cursing, started to put things in order again. Plaster fell; windows shattered; light planes were flipped over, and some trees were dinned down. A few missiles rose feebly and were outrun; they landed or blew up in the sky.

Across the world, radar operators looked at their screens and began to make apologetic reports. Interceptors tried to rise, but the shock waves tossed them aside until their pilots could fight them back into control. Then they landed because the Marandanian fleet was gone.

Everybody on Earth knew that something important was about to take place. Good or bad, something big was inevitable.

And in the lead spacecraft, the barytrine detector operator pointed down vaguely and said, "I think it might be down there."

Dusty looked down in time to see the lower edge of Lake Michigan. Somewhere in Northern Indiana! "Now!" he said. "Land there!"

He grabbed the microphone and spoke as the fleet circled down, then rose high going straight up until its forward motion died and then began to settle down on its drivers.

In a ringing voice, acting as though he were really the Commander, Dusty snapped: "Junior Spacemen of The Space Patrol, *Hear this!*"

The radio, powered by machinus forces, blanketed the broadcast stations on earth. Television screens broke into mad patterns of spots, and zigzag streaks of riotous color. Dusty's ringing voice broke into direction-finding equipment and radionavigational equipment, and made incomprehensible squiggles on radar early warning screens.

"Junior Spacemen, Attention to Official Orders! By now you must be aware that your Commander Dusty Britton flies above you in a fleet of spacecraft. *Hear this!*"

Hear it? Hardly anybody on earth could miss it! So powerful was that signal that poorly made fillings rattled Dusty's voice in the teeth; rusted rain gutters sang tinnily;

and because he was using a menslator, radio and loose filling and rain gutter spoke with equal clarity to all tongues.

"Within a few hundred miles of the lower edge of Lake Michigan there is concealed a dangerous piece of equipment known as a barytrine generator. This thing must be located and disabled, at once."

Young eyes glowed, older eyes looked puzzled, knowing eyes nodded. It might be another publicity stunt, but so far nobody had gone so far with a publicity stunt as to build a fleet of extremely competent spacecraft such as the thirteen that had shattered windows.

"Now!" snapped Dusty Britton, "to the Junior Spaceman who locates this barytrine generator, I will personally award the Medal of Merit, of solid platinum. And to the entire Group Command of which he is a member, I will award full scholarships at a real Space Academy, to make of them real spacemen!

"Now, Junior Spacemen, go out and find me that barytrine generator!"

Dusty looked outside; far below he began to see results. Tiny dots in lines and rough formations began to cross the land. Along the highways were streams of cars, some stopping to emit more black dots, others going on to find a clear searching place. Across the fields they went, peering into gullies and under bushes; invading sheds, both abandoned and in use; climbing rusty windmills and old water towers. Over the ground they went like a swarm of ants.

Then as the Marandanian fleet landed in a neat pattern, the barytrine detector sputtered once, flashed somewhere inside, and blew out with a phizzing sound and the emission of a thick curl of heavy, pungent smoke.

"Blooeey," said the detector operator. "But it's close, to do that!"

But Dusty had given a yell, and was leaping out of the spacelock because far across a field he could see a faint blue glow in the air. Ahead of him was a line of

Junior Spacemen pointing and running. Behind him were Marandianians peering out of the ports and the spacelock, eyes wide.

"Dusty!" called Gant Nerley, "you can't—that's dangerous . . ." for Dusty Britton had drawn his Marandianian blaster and was running in a long stride, with the weapon in his right hand.

Gant's voice trailed away as Dusty passed the eager boys and disappeared into the growing blue haze.

Dusty saw it and came to stop on his heels, his forefinger pressing the button deep. The sizzling beam lashed out, then slashed down across the barytrine generator, rose again and stopped with its fury drilling dead center.

There was a hiss and a sputter; blinding light flowed for a moment. Then the blue haze disappeared abruptly. A wave of intolerable heat blasted outward; then Dusty's closed eyes were seared with a flash of superbrilliant flame. The explosion knocked him backward, flat upon his spine.

He turned over, scrambled to his hands and knees, arose and began to stumble blindly back. A dozen members of a Group Command came through a small thicket of trees.

"Gee," said their Group Cadet Captain, "wouldn't you know the Commander would find it first!"

They stood on a small reviewing stand, Dusty Britton and the Group Command that had come through the trees to lead their burned Commander through the trees to safety from the exploding barytrine generator. Dusty's hands and face were beet red and his eyes were still puffy; but he could see, and Dusty saw with pride.

From a sheet of paper he read: "It is not within my power to award a medal that is worth the sheet iron it is made of. These Awards of Merit are therefore worth precisely the value of six ounces of platinum, each.

"But one thing is within my power. For their diligence and their faith, and their quick action I do hereby grant

and guarantee this noble group full scholarships to White Sands University, which will be a full fledged Spaceman's Academy by the time they graduate into it. I now hand my guarantee, certified checks, to President Hardwicke to keep in trust until that happy day.

"I salute the future Commanders of The Space Patrol and step down from my position to leave it open for the valedictorian among them!"

The watching crowd roared as Dusty Britton pinned his little medals on each proud youthful chest; the youths stood straight and saluted as Dusty stepped from the reviewing stand into a spaceport jeep and was whisked away across the field to the waiting Marandian fleet. He entered Gant Nerley's flagship to find a number of people waiting.

"Good show, Dusty," said Barbara.

"Thanks," grinned Dusty. "Now, let's shove—"

Martin Gramer cleared his throat. "See here, Dusty, you can't go popping off. We've got plans for you."

Dusty Britton eyed Gramer coldly. "Last time we were both in a room like this, you had other plans for me. You didn't like what happened when I took off on my own, and you even went so far as to cancel my contract."

"But look at the money. Think of the fame . . ."

"Phooey. Gant Nerley says I'll make a few billion out of my clear-channel idea."

"That's right," said Nerley. "One makes real money and fame by coming up with something extremely simple that nobody ever thought of before."

"So," said Dusty, "if you think I'm going to go on playing the part of a pseudo spaceman-hero, when there are real spacemen around, real spacecraft to travel in, and real space to look at, you're nuts."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Me? Well, Barbara and I are going to Marandis first. We've a contract to direct and star in a series of spectaculars, depicting what used to go on in the old days when men used tail-burners for drive. The old chemical-

fuel rockets, and stuff like that. Between jobs we'll roam around the galaxy a bit."

Dusty Britton grinned at Barbara Crandall knowingly. "I've got a shooting script of *Destination Moon* that I swiped from Central Files. That should knock 'em cold!"



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TROUBLED STAR

To the technicians of Marandis, center of a galactic culture, the problem seemed simple enough. A new star route had been discovered through the galaxy, and markers were needed to guide the ships. Three technicians landed on a small planet near a small sun, which had been chosen for such a traffic role. Chat Honger, Bren Fallow and Seyth Radnor soon found that the third planet of this little sun did contain intelligent life. And since making this sun into a three-day variable star would be fatal to life on this planet, measures had to be taken to protect these people.

Contact had to be made with the leader of this world so that the situation could be explained to its people. So Seyth Radnor turned his menslator on earth, and discovered that the man in everyone's mind was Dusty Britton of the Space Patrol.

Unfortunately, Radnor's investigation via menslator was somewhat incomplete. It failed to inform him that Dusty Britton was a TV and movie star. But the surprise awaiting the technicians from Marandis was more than equalled by the surprise awaiting the conceited TV actor, when Dusty Britton encountered Seyth Radnor in his space ship. Here is a novel of a man who found that he had to be what he had been pretending to be. This was one performance he dared not fluff for there would never be a remake.

Dusty's ardent love making on earth with a glamorous movie star and an equally passionate affair with a nurse on Marandis makes a sensational parallel in this fast moving, romantic science fiction novel.

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